The Mirage of Love

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Lady Diana

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To Rachu Ma'am, to Basu Sir..... Who inspired literature in me,

"For any writer, his literary Mecca is always his locale."

Dilip Kumar Basu
In one of his memorable
2008 lectures.

ONE

I took a shower and went through the drudgery of trying to make myself smell like a freshly plucked rose. I did not take my bath robe off as I waited for my husband.

From a few minutes, the clock soon struck an hour. Finally, I heard footsteps outside my room. He was done watching the TV. He was done with working on his computer. He came inside our bedroom quietly. He poured some water and he stood staring at the wall while he gulped down the water in the glass sip after sip. He did not realise I was there, half naked, wet, in a bath robe and waiting for him. He took a step towards the bed and he was struck by my lusty figure.

He asked, "Haven't you changed?"

I went to him and gripped him in the tenderness of my arms.

"I thought we could make this night especial. It's been some time now." I told him.

He made me release my arms lovingly murmuring something about his office the next day and he tried to linger away from me. I did not give up.

We had been married for the last 4 years; we did not have children yet. I stayed at home and he worked in one of the biggest MNCs in Asia. My husband travelled for 2 hours to reach his

office and in the office, he hardly had the time to even have his lunch properly least of all, to call me and to talk to me on the phone. The busy life to advance our lives in the opportunistic city and to sustain a family respectably and comfortably, proved an impediment to the very idea of raising a family. Time divided us; space divided us and in the depravity of our conjoined togetherness, fate was planning to divide us as well.

Evidently, after 4 years of our married life, a sense of my monotonous livelihood started setting in on my mind and in my heart. In desperation to keep the flame alive, I had started to seduce my husband. I coaxed him to love me and I coaxed him to even talk to me. He flopped on the couch when he returned home, he flopped on the bed after dinner, he tried to resist my advances but I never gave up.

Sometimes, a shameful suspicion presented itself to me and suggested to me if he had lost his interest in me and if he had kindled his feelings for someone else. But I ruled out any such suggestions. I trusted him too much and when I thought about it I felt ashamed of myself. But then, I continually probed into my existence with him and I asked to myself if it was at all possible for two people to have changed so much. We barely hugged each other; we barely went out together and worst of all, we had come to a point in our relationship where we were making efforts to even talk to each other.

The thought of my personal relationships at home only brought to me a wave of stress. The sterility of my life took away from me any sense of productive joy. Time had stopped for me and I counted not the days or the hours but every beat of my heart which had ceased to give a pulse in the monotony of my existence. I began to desire for a change, a need to revive and nurture my relationship with my husband. I gravely yearned for some happiness with him because only such a consolation of happiness I thought, could lead me away from my perilous existence. Consequently, I started

seducing him and I took the pleasure that he gave in every time.

Even though he never took any true interest, I tried to cajole him to me. That night, I was holding him tight to me. He smiled and looked down at me. I felt him aroused. I gave him my mouth and he kissed me.

I pushed him on the bed, and I disrobed myself. I bent over him and took his shirt off. I felt a sense of excitement and pleasure run through my veins.

Then suddenly, he took hold of me, looked at me, rose up and walked away. I was left in the room alone, naked not knowing what he was up to, silently expecting him again.

He came back to me after taking a piss. He put the gown gently over me and we lied down on the bed together. He had put a halt to our night ordeal abruptly.

He said, “Maybe I am too tired I just can’t do it. We need to sleep.”

I felt a sharp pang of disgust and of shame engulfing me. I did not get a wink of sleep that night. In the dark bed-room and in the arms of a numb relationship, my heart went to rove around in distant lands to search for an answer. I wanted to know what had changed in me or in him that had created such disparities between him and me. But that was a question I had been asking myself too often. And the longed answer wasn’t to be found anywhere. I was stranded, lost.

TWO

Life became a docile serving system; the only meaning that was attached to me was in terms of the domestic happiness I brought home. I was prone to wait on every one. I was especially prone to wait on my husband. With him, it was eternal.

I considered if planning for kids could help the matter with my husband.

The idea of having kids brought me to a dialectical conclusion.

I wondered if Harsh was insecure over the idea of having kids. I thought of him like he was a newly discovered land. I was determined to talk to him.

That night, before going to bed, I gave him his usual glass of milk and I sat by him to talk to him. But he was not looking at me, he was watching a match.

I asked, "Dear, can we talk?" and I opened a line of discussion with him.

Finally, he took notice of me and turned to face me. I was amused.

I asked, "Are you having problems at work these days?"

He said no.

I looked into his eyes and I convinced myself he was telling me the truth. “We have been married for some time now, what do you think about kids?” I asked.

His face was blank; I could not read any signs of disapproval on his face. He purged his lips and said quite casually,” I am fine if you want kids.” I was relieved.

“But how are we to have kids when we live the way we do now?”

He then raised his eyebrows and said, “So this is all about what had happened the last time?”

“No” I said nervously at the onset of such a confrontation.

I decided to speak my heart out the first time.

“I don’t know, you know, we have been married for 4 years now but we have changed so much. I know you are quite busy and all that but we ought to spend some time together. I can’t complain about weekdays since you stay so busy with your work and you spend the weekends fuzzing over the bills and shopping for the grocery, you practically use the weekends with buying and getting and fixing everything that I might not have to bother myself and I am really thankful about it but I stay at home, I think I can do these bits of work by myself. It would be fun and healthy for me and I would rather spend the weekends with you.”

He looked at me for some time and when he started speaking, I lost track of any sense in his words.

He told me, “It’s not easy. Life has to change when you are a family man and I am always tired. So after office, I can’t think of anything else other than sleep but at weekends, I don’t know, I can’t help it. I have to work and I get tired easily because I have

had long week days. And I can't bring myself to make love to you. But why are you getting all worked up about this?"

I heard the outcry of my sentiments when he finished saying, I screamed in silence at the disappointment I received, I wanted to scold him and quarrel with him. I asked myself if anybody could be so callous and as blind as he was. My temperature rose.

He wrapped up our conversation in such a matter of fact way and stood up to walk away from me. He did not understand the cave I had made in my heart over those years with him. It got hollower as I waited on him. I felt an impending doom over our relationship as I felt I was going to hide myself in that cave from him some day.

A feeling of redundant hopelessness descended upon me as usual. A morose picture of my life came flying out from some corner of my eyes and it flashed a blinding reality of my unhappy state of living. I saw that I woke up and made him break-fast every day, I cooked for him every day, I cleaned his home every day, and I waited on him every day. Every monotonous day was going to be about the monotonous husband and his needs and his wants.

My resentment grew.

We were lovers before and later we became strangers. In such an unhappy condition of living together, I could not conceive an idea of a family.

Futility was written in every part of my life.

We had loved each other with a fairy-tale-like hope of an everlasting happiness; we were rendering the hope some legitimacy by marrying each other, as if a marriage certificate could confirm our happiness in union.

THREE

Harsh always slept peacefully or it seemed he did. On one glowing morning, when sunlight streamed inside our room, I made plans to make myself rise above the helplessness.

I wanted to be happy. Just happy.

Not for the husband. Not for the home.

Not with the husband. Not with home.

And I knew where I had to go for such a naked happiness.

To my parents' house.

I was married four years ago and I could count on my fingers the number of times I had gone to see my parents. I was told it was not tradition for a married woman to go and see her parents often. I was repulsed by such a regressive tradition, but evidence before me told me to toe the line as my mother-in-law had also never gone to see her parents without her husband.

I sent Harsh away to his office and without asking him or anyone at home I went to see my parents and siblings.

The age of my rebellion began finally.

I climbed on the threshold and rang the bell; a familiar face

opened the door.

My mother.

She saw me and made a happy run to hug me. She brought me inside my home and here, I found the personification of peace and tranquillity. It was not only my parents and my siblings but the house itself looked crackling with merriment all the time to me. The drawing room made me happy. The couch made me happy. The lamps made me happy. The phone made me happy. The rocking chair in the corner made me happy. The furniture made me happy. The fish in the aquarium made me happy. Over here, everything around me issued a feeling of having been long-time friends. A rainbow of memories was attached to every corner. That house bore the unseen foot-prints of my toddling days. From every wall came an echo of my past laughter, or an echo of innocent quarrels with siblings.

My Mom gave a call to my Dad announcing my presence in the house and my dad came rushing out from his room. Like a king, the first hero of my life announced the house, "My princess is here today. Bring out the royal feast."

Thereupon, my mother quickly went to the kitchen and busied herself in cooking things I liked most; my dad went to the market to buy some essentials which Mom had made a list of. I entered the kitchen to help my mom but she abused me and sent me away to my brother and sister. I felt the past retrace its path.

When I was small and Mommy used to cook in the kitchen, I used to pester her with my wants, she used to threaten me and drive me away. I felt the sheer pleasure of an infant again.

At home again!

When I entered my brother's and sister's room, I was ambushed

on all sides. They were waiting for me behind the door and as soon as I entered their room, they started attacking me with their pillows. I splashed myself in the joy, picked a pillow myself and hopped around, yelled, laughed, and shrieked and beat each other with the pillows. I cried with joy.

After lunch Mom took me to her room and there, a tune of some seriousness began to be played between the two women. We started conversing as mature women did, sharing the chagrins of a married life. She asked after the well-being of my family. I satisfied her queries by telling her that everything was well and kept the larger part of the sorrow to myself. But I could not help tell her that I felt lonely as Harsh stayed very busy and so I wanted to do something substantial in my life.

"I want to do something Mommy." I said. I could not define what that substantial could be.

My mom looked at me and she asked, "And why is it difficult for someone like you to decide with what you want to do?"

I said," I don't know"

"Well, it's about time that you felt that way", she said and she seemed pleased with my desire.

She gave me a gentle look and asked me to come along with her. I went along with her and she brought me in front of my old room. She asked me to tidy my stuffs in the room and to come for tea after that. I was baffled; my mother was asking me to clean a room that I didn't use anymore. I went inside nevertheless and found everything was placed as I had left it.

My studying table stood intact and my single bed still looked very calming.

The wall on my room was pasted with the famous sayings of great men. I used to read them when weariness overcame me while I used to study. I used to feel its rejuvenating motive steer me back to my task.

I read them that day and I felt nostalgic, not rejuvenated. I realized there were no droughts or words for some forms of weariness. Those magnanimous words lay before me and I told myself that they were just too larger-than-life to be looked up to now and then. I didn't want to follow them anymore. It felt more human to feel weak, to break down.

The human heart is a martyr, forever understanding and forever giving. It chooses to break itself at times in the stead of breaking our dreams. At times, my martyr consoled me by saying that, its ordinary to celebrate over an ambition or goal achieved; it told me, sometimes the human heart wants to celebrate being sad too. It said it's mundane to be always happy in joy and health; that one can only know the depth of his heart through his pain and sorrow. I convinced myself of the sagacity of those words from my martyr and it aided me to realize the existence of every cell and tissue in my body, I reclaimed myself as a mere human which helped me in finding my way to a number of excuses to remain weak, liable and ordinary.

I went to my studying table and it gave me a sense of importance, as if great work had been done on it. I gave a smile to it and I touched the rim of my chair relishing its smoothness and gently padding it like it was some loyal pet I had. Then I went to the small Almira. On top of it were kept some trophies I had won in school and college. The wall behind it was neatly decorated with an array of certificates, all framed.

I saw them and I carefully ran through them one by one as if I wanted to assure myself they were mine. They were the testament of my achievements and my abilities. I had been one of the best

students of my school and college; highly spirited, ambitious, esteemed and loved by my teachers. I had thrown all that away.

Beside the certificates, my father had framed a chart that I had made, a chart of all the goals in my life. I had written,

1) B.A
2) M.A
3) Ph.D.
4) A scholar
5) Professor
6) Women and Child education activist

I had decorated them, drawn along with it so many side notes about where to start and when to achieve. I was amazed; time and relationships had hypnotized me to abandon the pulsating life of creativity in me. I touched the chart with my bare hand and the spell of amnesia broke.

In me, I realized a new world born. I wanted to be the reigning queen of that world, full of the power and the independence to speak, deny, mould and destroy. I wanted to write the new commandments of that world.

On my way back to my so-called-home, I was holding the chart close to my bosom. After I reached home, I devoted myself to some arrangements; I made a small study area and placed the chart right in front of the table. Beside the table, I placed a book shelf where I planned to stack up my books. There was an urgency in my efforts to replace who I was, the miserable woman.

It was a long way to reach wherever I wanted to reach. I compiled some books I had studied in my graduation and Masters. I revised them and I expanded my reading accordingly. I started to research

on some topics and I published my findings in journals. Some months elapsed while I studied away. Through my studies, my days revealed new discoveries, new thoughts, new messages and I waited patiently in quietly collecting these drops of wisdom until I formed an ocean.

I had given an MPhil entrance exam in a University. On the day the results of the exam came, I felt the numbing effect of joy when I saw my name among the candidates who had made it to the programme. That was the beginning of a venture to discover myself and explore what was dormant in me, some abilities and some dreams which were yet a mere shadow.

FOUR

I was within the hold of an innocent and ignorant enthusiasm when I had married. I was too eager to become a good wife and I wanted to mould myself into a good mother too. But a pressurized insistence to follow the protocol of home-making made everything stale for me.

I felt the weight of culture and tradition over my shoulders and there was a time when I started feeling they were claws around my body and I started beating my hands and legs against it to rid myself of them.

I wore the bangles they felt like hand-cuffs to me. I wore a Sari it felt like a prisoner's dress. The jewellery I wore choked me.

Everything in the house demanded me; every speck of dust had my name on it. Every piece of cloth lying about had a label with my name on it. I became a Prometheus in pursuing the domestic chores every day.

I wanted to brew up some emotions in serving my family, I wished to earn and build the relationships I had newly encountered as a married woman. But there was an almost military check on me by the society, by tradition, by culture; to measure my efficacy by my work at home until I began to dread over my work and the needs of my family.

I started thinking of the fate of all the girls who did not like cooking, who did not like washing dishes, who did not like mopping

and dusting. There is never a choice of liking or not liking anything. It's a function if not pursued, we become unholy and untraditional. It is deviously common for the worldly ambitions of a woman to exist as a supplement to her existence as a mother or a wife and it is too uncommon the other way round. Irony is when a woman dumps her life in the name of a new beginning as a married woman and people applaud her giving her the medal of a traditional and devoted wife. The world considers the murder of her identity as a completely normal act to pursue in the face of raising a family. It is at times like this, that sometimes, an unholy and untraditional woman like me, would have to take the audacity to question into the nature of what is common and ordinary and what is not common and ordinary. It is a question of whether we want to be confused and veiled in one way or be confused and veiled in another way.

Sometime later, I went along with my husband and his parents to see a girl for one of our relatives. The father and mother of the boy came to our house along with the boy and we all set off together in our car.

When we reached the girl's home, we were greeted with much respect. The father of the girl folded his hands again and again before saying anything to us. The boy's parents, I observed, didn't show such humility.

When we were shown the girl, the boy's mother asked her, "you do know how to cook right?"

She nodded.

In a minute, the girl's mother presented a verbal menu of the things her daughter could do. Then, the boy's father asked, "What is your educational qualification?"

The girl's father replied, "She is an MBA and she works in a private firm."

They made the boy and the girl talk to each other for a while and after taking the consent of both of them, the parents accepted the girl as their prospective daughter-in-law.

In the car, on our way to home, the parents discussed they had finally found a girl to manage their son. Ironically, two people entered a marriage as equals and after marriage, the home is solely the responsibility of only one participant.

With modernization, the demands of skills for a desirable daughter-in-law have also increased. At the time of my grandmother, she was married off when she was twelve years old, she had nine children after that and her parents-in-law had chosen her primarily because she was young, beautiful and healthy, apart from the family and friendly ties the relations shared. Today, however, the society wants to hold on to its hubris but it also wants an educated girl. I felt sick. I became insecure to enter home, I perceived the husband's home as a microcosm of traditions, culture, religion and all forms of societal dogmas.

When the car halted in front of the house, I got down immediately to feel my feet touch the firm ground. I kept looking at my feet; I felt the need to assure myself that I was a human being and not some humanoid form bred by the abstract traditions and culture to support its sustenance.

Some noise in the neighbourhood broke my vexation with my existence; I turned to focus my attention towards the ensuing noise of not-so-rhythmic head piercing music. When I listened more intently I realized the music and the noise of dancing were made by a group of eunuchs who had come to bless a newly born baby boy. They were blessing the parents for another boy child.

What hypocrisy, I wondered. Dressed as women, they had come to bless for a male child. I asked how such a tradition is a crime any different from pre-natal sex determination.

As I entered the door, I heard the eunuchs bargaining for their blessings. They demanded a hefty price in return for their blessings. I did not care to know more about the act of extortion and I silently went inside my room to my loneliness again.

FIVE

There comes a stage in every marriage when the husband ceases to be a lover and becomes a friend, an unceasing companion of joy and sorrow. That stage of the married life had entered my life rather soon.

While the husband ceased to be a lover, I ceaselessly asked myself if something was wrong with me. Did I grow unattractive to him? Did I put on weight? Did he feel ashamed to take a bundle of sari and clinking jewellery to dinner? Did he compare me with the other younger sexy intelligent female colleagues of his?

My world was in a delirium of questions. Questions that I had raised against myself to check where I could find myself at fault. Questions which were sucking sanity out of me drop after drop because I was unable to find the answers. My existence, my desires, my body, my emotions demanded his contingency of love and acknowledgement.

My studies managed, to some extent, to lead me away from the whirlpool of emotions. I kept myself busy. At some times such a methodology worked to retain some calm in me while on other times, frustrated over the distractions I received from those questions.

But one day, one very fateful day, I received one answer to all my questions and the house of glass I was living in came shattering down on me to cut away every hope of recovering my life with my husband. That fateful day, I was planning to buy some books and

I ventured to Connaught Place. I plucked the sumptuous books with a watery mouth and after I had paid the bill I decided to enter a coffee shop and sit there and read a book for a while with a mug of coffee, it was a luxury I couldn't afford at home as the gamut of domestic conundrum surrounded me in every wakeful seconds of my day. But just as I was about to enter the coffee shop, I saw Harsh there. I was delighted. Then next to him I saw a young woman.

They were sitting close to each other and they were holding hands. Somehow, the equation appeared wrong to me and it refused to be acknowledged by my mind.

My Harsh and somebody else, which meant the lady was not me.

They looked so happy with each other.

That happy picture was not mine and Harsh's.

I saw Harsh smiling, teasing her hands. I felt my world swooning. There was the man for whom I had left my life.

He looked so at ease with that lady. I recalled something about our love life before our marriage. We had been as lovely and happy as that picture before me. I knew well enough that I had contributed nothing to deserve something as vile as what Harsh was giving me. Yet, out of some traditional grooming of habitually self-questioning myself I asked to myself, "What did I do that I was replaced?"

A boy passing by bumped to me and after the jerk I awoke to the fact that I was still standing there. I walked away from them. I passed by people without knowing I was walking along with them or among them. I kept my head down and I walked watching my steps as if I wanted myself to retrace every step I had taken wrong. I was stopped by a pair of boots in front of me. I looked up and I

saw Dr.Dhiraj, my Mentor and Professor at the University.

"Hello Beautiful, where are you headed?" he asked. I looked at him dazed. I asked myself if he had just called me beautiful. I couldn't convince myself fully of what I had heard about myself. I kept looking at him.

He looked at me uneasily and he asked, "Are you feeling alright?"

I nodded, and I said I am just tired. He took the bags of books from my hands and said, "Look at you, your research has just started and you are already burdened by the weight of intellectualism. You are not scared of studying thick books, are you? Or books without pictures as some of my students would say." He chuckled as he said those words.

I gave a faint smile. He asked me which text I was reading, I told him, "Orlando."

"So what is it about Orlando that interests you?" he asked.

I said, "Cross-dressing, fixity of gender roles".

"Those are very redundant topics, too apparent for a research scholar dear. Why don't you explore more?

Cross-dressing and fixity of gender roles.

They were not redundant topics to me. He offered to drop me home but I refused and took an auto. When I reached the so called home, I packed away all my clothes, I put my books on the shelves neatly and went to shop for clothes. I bought jeans, kurtis, and trousers for myself.

I cut my hair short, neatly fashionable. I removed the bindi

and the mangalsutra. I no longer parted my hair to put the vermilion on my forehead.

The lost and betrayal I had suffered had sparked some madness in me to unfollow and undo whatever I had observed to pursue happiness and wellbeing for the others, and to reverse the attention to myself. I knew I was going to be rebuked and counselled in the name of tradition to come back to the path of virtue. However, I was at a faceoff with society and its fake traditions. Traditions whose observance did not give you your love and your respect, it did not entail you your wishes and your choices; it did not entail you with reasons if life failed despite its scrutiny. And I asked myself, 'did I make these traditions that I have followed?' An inner voice, confident and strong, rebellious and fiery spoke to me in a terrorizing tone, 'NO' it said. Then I told the creature within me from a throne high above, like a queen burning in anger in the face of a humiliation, 'SINCE I HAD NO SAY IN IT, I OBSERVE IT NOT'.

When my husband returned home, I kept myself at my studying table. He came and asked me to serve him dinner.

I told him, "I have some work, can you please serve yourself?" I had never done that before. Inexorably, denying assistance and service made me feel guilty because I had disillusioned subservience with virtue.

He looked at me for a while and went away. After dinner and sometime later, when he was ready to go to bed he asked me to give him his milk and I said the same thing again, "Can you please serve yourself please?"

The second time, he felt his ego rattled and it made me happy.

"You don't have the time to even give me a glass of milk?"

I promptly replied, “No I don’t have the time.”

“What is the matter with you?”

I told him in return, “I am going to be really caught up with my work these days; I would have to leave early. So I expect you to help me out in the kitchen from tomorrow.”

He was exasperated.

“Isn’t it good? You will be occupied even on weekdays; you won’t have to talk to me if you are busy with something. After all, isn’t talking to me a dreadful thing to you?” I retorted.

“Woman, don’t start with this again. I have had a long day. I won’t put up with you any longer and I have a long day tomorrow too.” He said threateningly.

I kept my cool and said icily to him, “So you have another day in that coffee shop at Connaught place?”

Silence fell between us as he looked at me with his shocked eyes, wondering how I knew his deepest and darkest secrets. He could not look at me anymore and after casting his glance down, he walked out of my sight.

After some time my mother-in-law came to check why the light in the reading room was still lit up, when she entered she saw me staring at the wall ahead. She went in the kitchen and made some coffee for me. She then came into the reading room and she promptly kept the coffee mug before me. I was startled.

She left me to my weary thoughts without saying anything to me. I looked at the mug and a sense of being lost and helplessness filled my heart. I tried to position my sentiments in accordance to that act of silent kindness and that act, during the day, of silent

mutilation of my world; it accumulated into a bewildering discernment of an awareness of a developing relationship that was not yet there on the one hand and the losing of a relationship that was still there.

That night I cried in torment. As if the gods partook in my suffering, the tremor in my heart caught the motion of the heavy dark clouds above and the sky split open with masses of tear drops as monsoon broke open in Delhi.

SIX

I didn't make the breakfast the next day. I dressed myself and left for the library after informing my mother-in-law that I had work. I was wearing jeans that day and not sari. That morning I woke up and I took my bath in no hurry. I dried my hair and I applied some light make-up. I even snatched the luxury to choose my dress taking my precious time while Harsh sat up on the bed and watched me wondering when I was going to give him his tea.

The dress I wore went through a series of censorship, it had to be approved first by my father-in-law, then by my mother-in-law and lastly by my husband. There were times when my first judge disapproved a dress in disdain which was liked by the second judge. In that case, the second judge went by the decisions of the first one. But there were also times when the third judge brought me a dress and the first two judges disapproved of it, and I wore that dress at the cost of some taunts and their spiteful glare. When I wore some of the dresses the first two judges liked but were disapproved by the third judge, such a condition led to quarrels often. Thus, my life was a continuous effort to maintain the scale of the weighing machine, to achieve equivalence on both sides but what were actually being weighed were my values on both the sides.

The change of dress and my looks declared to everyone that they were being given the privilege of seeing a transition. Though I took courage to undertake the changes, my rebellion also made me nervous. I felt I was being offensive to everyone around me. By the looks from their eyes, I felt my vulgar existence. I felt out of

place but I carried myself away somehow.

When I reached the library, I studied endlessly like I was a mad scientist searching for serendipity. I roamed among the books smelling its antiquity. Within the confines of the pages I felt more freedom than with wherever my walking legs could take me. I savoured on each word. I nourished my imagination. I propped up my intellect.

In the evening as I was leaving, I saw Dr.Dhiraj walk past me. He hadn't noticed me. I ran up to him and accosted him. He was surprised to see me but he didn't say anything and apologised for not recognising me. His eyes surveyed the new me with a sense of delight but he only said, "You look different today." I beamed at this remark. I smiled and thanked him. I wanted to ask for some suggestions from him.

"I need some help", I told him.

"Yes Madame, how can I help you?" he asked delighted.

"Sir, can you suggest some critical readings of post-colonial feminist literature?" I asked.

"Why not, let's go and sit in the cafeteria while we discuss. I am awfully tired today and I was on my way for some coffee", he said.

So, we shifted our pace towards the University cafeteria and we sat down on one of the chairs near the window.

"It's so stuffy inside here, I need some air", he said.

On seeing the Professor, the lady manager of the cafeteria approached us and asked us if she could get us anything. We told her we came for coffee so she yelled to her boys from right across

the hall for two cups of coffee.

"What a voice, you could sing", Dhiraj said winking at me.

The lady manager gave a nervous smile and disappeared behind her cash counter.

Dhiraj turned to me at last and said, "So, what were you saying?"

"Sir, I want to combine post-colonial theories and feminism, not that we can't study about post-colonial feminist works but I would like to study attributes of migration literature to understand and study feminist theories of alienation particularly in a phenomena like marriages."

"Elaborate."

"Sir, after my preliminary studies, I have come to an understanding that irrespective of gender, migration points towards shifting places and the experiences with an alien culture, narratives of self-discovery. But what researchers haven't pursued till now is that marriage is also a migration. It's a migration that had started even before the founding of a kingdom or nation-state idea. Something which has been going on since time immemorial, women travelling from one family to another and in the process they not only begin to share lived experience with strangers and make them kin to them but sometimes they imbibe entirely new language, culture and tradition."

He gave me a smile of approval.

"Elaborate" he asked.

I continued, "Ok I might be wrong I am not a scholar yet but personal experience shows that when a woman marries she has to

shift not only from a physical location to another but also her relationships. She finds herself alone in a domain full of strangers. Her ordeal in her new home is an act of attempted self-discoveries and there is no stable self in her, when she tries to get into the role of a daughter-in-law her husband reminds her of her wife's duties, and when she attempts to don the role of a wife, the children remind her of her maternal duties. Just as an immigrant is dependent upon the contingency of his passport to prove his nationality, for a woman the contingency of her relationships prove her existence. I think there is a lot of plurality in Indian women especially and that plurality again camouflages her true identity, she compromises the self all the time for the other.

He looked at me and said, "It sounds formidable to me! Maybe you can support your argument through some literary works, and then it would be better"

He took my notebook and he started writing the names of some books I had to start to read to understand migration literature and to support my theory.

The lady manager saw her boys bring out the coffee and eagerly, she took the coffee tray from them and she gave us our coffee herself. She smiled at Dhiraj flirtingly and she placed the coffee cups before us.

She lingered around us for some time, asking if we wanted anything else. On being told we needed nothing more, she lingered around to tell us to call out at her in case we wanted something. She was becoming insufferable for us. She was just nearly gone when she turned back her steps and said,

"Oh Dear, you are wearing such a nice tie today. It looks so good on you. I really admire your choices of colour."

Just then Dhiraj started blushing. He was wearing a nice purple

colour tie that day.

"Madam, thank you very much", he said very politely but very awkwardly. That was the first time; when I saw a boy in him. He took off the tie and kept it in his bag.

I protested and teased him, "But it was looking good."

He was tormented," That woman is dangerous, you know that? Anyways YOU didn't notice I was wearing a nice tie today."

I really had not noticed. In the light and friendly environment, my teacher turned to a young companion I could talk to, I could laugh with. He was smart, he was learned and he was funny. He emanated a very supportive feeling and he was open to discussions, however stupid our ideas were. He also raised very important topics in the class for open discussions, be they from politics or literature, he knew and he had a perspective about most of the issues around him. I was moved by his radical ideas. To listen to him made a world of difference as he made us feel important, like we were some social engineers. His classes were not confined to chalk and board teaching. He educated us and not trained us.

I did not realise that when we left the cafeteria together, he had left carrying a lot of my anxieties which I had slipped out accidentally while I was discussing my thesis. He had looked at me doubtfully yet he had listened and when I had finished explaining, he had merely scribbled some names of the books I had to read giving the shape of my anxiety and my understanding of the world I was living in, a textual context.

However, I went home, after each class with him, carrying much more than intellectualism from him. I carried away his energy, a desire to emulate his learnedness. I admired the fact that he had achieved a lot of things in his life at a young age.

Dhiraj was captivated by my enthusiasm towards a feminist revolution. I always talked about women's sufferings. He suggested to me to join an NGO on a part time basis to help the needy women and to understand the nature of ritualistic trauma they went through. He told me the name of an NGO which he had founded along with some other social activists. That day, I admired my teacher even more. I had found a matrix from whence sprouted the stirring of a new life.

In a few days, I signed up as a volunteer with the NGO which took care of down-trodden women and it co-ordinated with other institutes in the country in understanding the position of the women in the society, what they lacked and what could be done for their empowerment. I met so many women who were jilted by fate and by the society. Some were victims of dowry, some of widowhood, some of illiteracy, some of their own children, some of loneliness. They were all immigrants in the Land of Sorrow.

I was also an immigrant in that Land and I was also in search of an oasis. There were different tales from every woman but we all had one reason for our sufferings: alienation.

I discovered a zeal in me which I had never known before was within me, and so I began to actively engage myself in my research studies and I worked for those impoverished women as well. An understanding of the scarred lives of those women assisted in my studies, my research, the facts I found and not the other way round. From a research student I became a social activist. I listened to the sad tales of the women who were housed in the NGO hostel and I also went to courts with Dhiraj to witness the fight for their rights. We left no stone unturned to help them in making a living of their own.

There was something about Dhiraj. I wondered if it was his clean look or his deep clear eyes or his intellectualism or his conviction or his assurances or his stature. I didn't know. All of us

trusted him. His colleagues highly esteemed him. Around him, there was always an aura that everything can be managed.

Standing by him, my own drifting restlessness met the shore. He did not conform to dogmas. He seemed alien to culture and tradition. To me, he seemed like a universal being.

My existence in the conjoined environment with him made me different as he seemed to embrace my solitude, and in the enraptured state with him I started living in a cocoon where my sorrows were slowly being metamorphosed in silent joys. Walking in the traces of his footsteps, I began giving more to the society instead of lamenting its misdeeds. The more I persevered for the helpless women, the more I felt liberated. The more I empowered them, the more I felt the power of my position. Thus, I learnt that it was not in the angry curse but in the sympathetic words and deeds that could remedy the sour wounds given by life.

One night, I was in my bed. I didn't realise Harsh was not asleep as well. I was watching the ceiling above. As if by a projector's work, I saw myself with Dhiraj. I smiled at the imagined pictured above me.

I heard Harsh cough. He was not asleep yet.

"Do you want to talk?" he asked.

"No." I gave a peaceful silent reply.

We lay on the bed together. A married couple each occupied with his and her own thoughts and dreams. Each with his and her own desires and miseries. Free from each other.

I felt the cord around me woven by Harsh loosening. I didn't want to complain about anything to him. I knew he might have wanted to talk to me about his affair. He might have wanted to tell

me that he liked that girl or he was sorry.

Whatever he said could have brought us to some resolution that night, but I chose silence because I was at a phase of my life where I didn't want to reconcile with him. Being estranged from him had helped me to rediscover myself. I didn't want to consume myself in reconciliation again.

"Harsh?"

"Yes?"

"I think I am attracted to Dr.Dhiraj, my Professor."

He looked at me, and turned away uninterestingly.

"Yes right." He said and slept.

The words came out of me as naturally as a flower opens up with the touch of sunlight. I didn't struggle inside to let those words wriggle out. I couldn't get into his mind; I couldn't say he was jealous when I said those words. I thought, he might have thought I was trying to make him jealous or I was trying to avenge myself. But his disinterestedness, when I told him that I was attracted to another man, made me think how could he take it for granted that I couldn't commit which he had already committed? Why was he not insecure, angry like I had been when I had discovered about his affair? He simply thought I couldn't do it. He was so insured against the idea of me committing an act of infidelity. I felt pity for him.

SEVEN

The next day I learnt from the University site that there was going to be a seminar; I decided to present a paper in the seminar. I informed Dhiraj about the prospect and he was very happy and he promised to help me where ever I needed his help.

Day in night out, I devoted myself to studying. One night when I reached home, I found everybody waiting for me. They had their dinner and they were seated in the front room. It was an atmosphere charged with hostility and I simply asked, "What's the matter?"

Dhiraj told me his parents wanted to talk to me. I faced them and my father-in-law started by saying,

"It is a very good thing that you are working hard on your studies but studies don't run homes. You have been neglecting your home ever since you have started studying and we can't tolerate this anymore. Finish your domestic chores and go. Do you have to go every day? Can't you study at home; if you stay at home you will be able to see after your home too. It almost seems to us that you are just not interested in your home affair that is why you go looking about for an escape."

Every nerve in my body rose to self-defence.

"This is not an escape for me, Papa", I said vehemently, "and besides, I do whatever I can and go for the library. What domestic chores do I leave behind?"

Then, my mother-in-law intervened, “Look how shamelessly she can answer to her father-in-law.”

“If I have been accused of something shouldn’t I even defend myself, I do all my work.” I said.

My mother-in-law told her son, “What an untraditional woman you have brought Harsh; we had told you against marrying her. Now see for yourself. She is going to sit on our heads.”

Harsh remained silent, acting the well-mannered son. His father continued however, “You only come back home to sleep. We don’t want you going out every day. It’s not like you go to some office and you earn. Then we could have understood your compulsions but you only study.”

“But I can’t research from home. I need the library. I need to be in touch with the professors. And I have joined the NGO, I work there.” I nearly implored.

“It’s not like you are pursuing engineering or commerce or MBBS that you need to study all day and night. Yours is only literature. You only read stories. We know what you are up to”, my father-in-law told me.

I looked at him shocked.

Such ignorant fools, I thought.

“Everything is literature”, I told him.

“Ok, enough just agree to what mom and dad are asking. They know the world better and they care for us.” Harsh said.

I looked at him with wide open eyes. I couldn’t believe he was

asking me to consent to such an unfair demand.

"Why can't you keep a maid servant?" I asked.

"Is it so difficult for you to stay at home at times and look after the affair at home?" He asked me flaring up.

There ensued a quarrel between him and me, I asked him, "You never stay behind to cook or to look after home."

He yelled at me, "I GO TO THE OFFICE. WHO WILL GO TO THE OFFICE IF I STAY BEHIND TO COOK?"

"EXACTLY BECAUSE I DON'T GO TO THE OFFICE SO YOU THINK I CAN ALWAYS TAKE OUT THE TIME. WHATEVER I DO IS UNIMPORTANT RIGHT?"

While all those horrible things were being said, his mom started crying, "What will become of my son, what kind of a girl he has married? You have ruined his life."

I couldn't contain my anger anymore, "I? I ruined your son's life? I? I left behind my life, my career. I do whatever you say. He has moved on in his life. I am still nowhere because I wanted him to move on. He has moved so far away that he doesn't even realise how far we are both drifting apart from each other. And he is cheating on me. He has his source of joy and pleasure. How am I ruining him?"

Both the parents looked at me and then to their son.

I was then consumed by a rising wave of tears and I stormed out of the room and found solace among my books in the study room.

For a long while I contemplated upon what I could do.

To consent or to defy?

Just then I received a text message.

It was from Dhiraj

I HOPE YOU ARE STUDYING HARD.

I was filled with hopelessness. I replied;

NOT REALLY.

I JUST WANTED TO INFORM YOU THAT KAMLA HAS DELIVERED A HEALTHY BABY BOY.

It was such good news, I replied

WOW

He said,

I AM HERE IN THE HOSPITAL WITH SUNANDA AND KALPESH. YOU HAVE LOOKED AFTER HER WELL. SHE WENT ILL IN THE EVENING SO WE RUSHED HER TO THE HOSPITAL.

I read his message and suddenly the question of taking care shifted to me as I wondered if anybody was ever going to look after my wellbeing. I sunk back to my tears, in a sense of all pervading loneliness. I didn't reply to his messages any more,

WHAT HAPPENED? BUSY? He asked.

I sent him a message regretting every word I was typing on my phone,

CAN I WITHDRAW MY NAME FROM THE PRESENTERS' LIST?

He asked,

WHAT HAPPENED?

I replied;

HAVING A HARD TIME AT HOME? RESPONSIBILITIES YOU KNOW?

He replied;

NO YOU CAN'T. YOU HAVE TO PULL THIS OFF.

I was lost. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know after what happened that night if I had enough courage in me to go against the family. I was afraid of making a fool of myself on the podium.

After some time I received a text message from Dhiraj, one last message that finalised that I was not going to quit, one last message that made me smile, one last message that made me look ahead towards the coming day.

I AM WITH YOU. HAVE NO FEAR. I WILL LOOK AFTER YOU.

EIGHT

After that day, nobody talked to me. The parents feared I was going to malign their son's name and Harsh was angry that I had betrayed him by telling about his affair to his parents who didn't even believe me. They probably thought I was provocatively degrading their son's image to get what I wanted.

I was at peace. Estrangement at home gave me peace because I could find a voice for myself in that silence. When I met Dhiraj, I always forgot my pain and disgust. We sat together for hours preparing and discussing my topic for the presentation. He informed me there was going to be a conference in Jaipur about women empowerment organised by the UNDP. He was going to attend that conference after we were through with the seminar. I was thrilled.

Women empowerment!

UNDP!

It's was one of those things I wanted. Seeing my dancing eyes he asked if I wanted to join him, he was going with a group of the NGO members. I immediately said yes. He asked me to consider again because it was a week long programme and he told me to talk to my family first. Some morbid feeling came across my mind thinking how I was going to tell Harsh and his parents about my stay away from home. He knew the constraints I was in. I said I would tell him after I talked to my husband.

When I went back home, it was total silence I met. I cooked and served everyone. When everybody had settled down after dinner, I told them, "Two weeks later, I have a seminar and a week after that I am going to Jaipur I have a conference there."

I didn't ask their permission. I simply informed them. They appeared uncomfortable but didn't say anything to me. They dispersed one by one from the room until I was left alone, only Harsh didn't seem to have minded. I went inside to study. I didn't have the time to think what they were thinking about because I had too many important things to handle.

Two weeks later, I had delivered my presentation; I presented a paper that explained the parallel nature of feminist revolutionary writing and women's emancipation. I felt important. I had delivered my message.

It's important to write for emancipation.

I had traced the relationship right from the beginning of the rise of novels. It is also particularly noticeable that the question of how the society viewed its women came most prominently with the rise of the novels. Novels started probing the women character stereotypes and explored in different realms, what were repressed.

Virginia Woolf was also a propagator of such an idea. She also envisaged as was conceived in the conferences she had spoken in that she saw the dire need to write as a means to emancipation. I saw Dhiraj in the front row, he clapped and gave me a thumps up. I was so proud to see I made him happy.

My life's happiness and purpose took a sudden blind turn. The few moments I met Dhiraj made me happy. Talking to him was inspirational in nature. It made me relaxed and I worked harder. Being at his side was a revelation of the world around me with its miseries and its helplessness, its cruelties and injustice and I wanted

to know whatever he knew, I wanted to master the subjects he was well versed in and I began seeing him as a beacon that guided me through the dark passages of my life.

I felt like I was being guided but the truth was I didn't know where I was going. I kept looking around stunt at the facts of human miseries surrounding me. Scared, I found solace in Dhiraj's company. I didn't know where feelings were leading me. I was in the age of innocence and innocence from ignorance blinded me from seeing the repercussions.

After my seminar was over, I started preparing for my conference. One afternoon my mother-in-law came to me and said Papa's sister was coming to stay over for two weeks in our house.

I was defeated. She asked me if I could cancel the tour because the aunt had many things to say to me.

That elder sister of my father-in-law had enjoyed the status of being a patriarch. When her father had passed away, she had promised him that she was going to take care of her younger brother, her younger sister and her mother. As a result, she had raised them as if they were her children and every decision in their lives was taken by her. She had also married really late, it was only after she got her younger brother and sister married that she herself got married to a widower. She had no children.

For her sacrifices she was highly regarded by both her brother and sister and took her for their mother. That sister of my father-in-law was coming to meet me. Something was going to burst. I felt the time bomb ticking.

I called up Dhiraj and told him I was not going to make it to Jaipur. I told him relatives were coming and I had to be home.

My father-in-law's sister's name was Kalindi. Aunt Kalindi

came by an early train. I donned a sari just to please her. I had cleaned the house and her room was also prepared according to her taste. I had covered her bed with white linen cloths as she preferred, the draperies of her room was also white. I had placed some flowers beside her bed. I had also placed a book of GITA on the table beside her bed. She liked to muse over the holy parables every now and then. Everything about the room had to be also ordered according to her beliefs. I turned and shifted the bed so that the end where the head was going to be faced the east; she was very particular about it. I could recall after I was married, she spent several days with me, feeding me with the victuals of a religious home-maker.

Aunt Kalindi entered the house with her no-nonsense look. She looked at me curiously. I went to her and touched her feet. She didn't say anything. When I had raised myself, she looked at my shortened hair with intent eyes. Without making any remark, she went to her room speedily to change.

Later when I brought out her breakfast, she complained it was cold so I put them in the microwave to warm it a bit and to serve her the hot breakfast. When I brought to her the hot breakfast, she complained again, "I wanted it a bit warm who will have the burning breakfast."

It was never easy to please aunt Kalindi. Everybody said she was born with an oath that she would never be satisfied of anything. She was particularly strict with girls. Having assumed the role of a patriarch in her family, she guarded traditions with her soul and prestige. She never allowed her younger sister to come away from her home to see us without her husband. She herself never came to see her brother after she was married unless it was really necessary. She again didn't allow my mother-in-law to go to see her parents. It was a chain reaction of denial.

The normal course of starting a day for aunt Kalindi was to

wake up before sunrise and to take bath. After which she paid respect to the sun by joining her hands in front of the rising sun. Then she watered the Tulsi plant. She went to the temple after that and she had her first food of the day with the sweet, given by the priest in the temple, from the feet of the god's idol.

My questioning mind sneered at the hypocritical set up. Our tradition preaches for women to be chaste, to be religious. We are asked to inculcate strong values in ourselves for the sake of a good family and society. The helm of small temples at homes are the domain of the women to serve but the big temples beyond home hemisphere, they are occupied by men priests. If religion required women followers at home to lead and serve, for the betterment of the society, why it is not represented in the larger society. Today, men work in elite restaurants and hotels as chefs, while kitchen remain the domain for wives. Women priests are still a rare view. As long as it's about earning some capital, it's a man's world but within home, the service is for the women to give.

Aunt Kalindi kept a very strict watch over me. I didn't dare touch my books while she was at home. During the night, I tried to stray away from my room into my study room but Aunt Kalindi, on seeing the lights lit on, came sniffing after the smell of my books and she told me,

"At this point of the night, you are supposed to spend time with your husband. What are you doing here?"

Terrified to offend her, I tip-toed out of the room and scrutinizing me intently, she reminded me commandingly,

"Wake up earlier."

After three days she opened the topic to me, "It's been four years you have been married. You still don't have a child. Doesn't it bother you? If you bear a child, you won't have to roam about

here and there. You would reconcile yourself with your home."

I remained silent listening to her.

She continued seeing my submission so she asked, "Haven't you been to the doctor yet?"

I shook my head. The following afternoon, she took me to the doctor and they conducted an examination on me. They told Aunt Kalindi that I could bear children. When we came back home, she remained in a wondering mood upon why I didn't bear children after four years of marriage.

She called upon Brahmins and they, upon checking my horoscope, reported that I could bear children only if they conducted a puja for me and offered the gods with clothes and food.

My disgust was growing, I felt humiliated. But I told myself, its only two weeks. After two days, they conducted the puja. After the puja, some senile elders of the vicinity came to our house having heard of the matter and they suggested I was infected with some evil spirit or the medical examination was not conducted properly. They asked aunt Kalindi to visit a particular BABA who treated women's sterility with miracles, some of them had brought some lucky stones which astrologers had given them at the time of their own daughters-in-law. They started consoling me.

They were taking advantage of the pandemic status of being elder women and they were intruding into my life with their mocking advice and false pity. I got up unable to control myself any longer and I walked away. I felt the breadth from the gaping mouths on my back. I turned to them and said, "Did it ever occur to all of you that the problem could be with the man?" I looked at their faces, demanding some answer but because they could not give me any, they started blaming my audacity.

I walked away from them into my room. The file of senile women flocked out disgusted. My mother-in-law and Aunt Kalindi were profusely making apologies.

I had grown senile and old with Harsh too. It was easier to fight with him than to make love. Life was becoming insufferable with so many things to keep up with and with no recluse to love or a sense of contentment.

I began to feel that I wanted to get rid of Harsh. When it becomes difficult to fight a tyrant, we tend to blame the factors that brought on the tyrant. Such is the case with tradition. I couldn't fight the cultural dogmas without hurling upon myself some mud so I blamed Harsh because his coming in my life brought so many rituals as a free package.

I greatly wished my relationship with Harsh could be saved but I knew that was a hope against hope because while I was clawing on the walls of the cave that imprisoned me to dig out a way for escape, Harsh had transgressed. He had moved on without bothering to save me. I could not forgive him when I thought of his choices.

I thought of the conference at last. I packed my bag and made a rush for a Jaipur bus. When I was there, I called up Dhiraj first. He came to pick me up from the bus stop and he took me to the hotel where he, along with the other NGO members, was stationed for the conference. I reserved a room for myself. I got so many calls from Harsh but I didn't take any of his calls. I told myself "let him long for an answer if not for me."

After I had washed myself, I ordered for some food. There was a knock on my door half an hour later, and there was food for me. There came a second knock on the door and there was Dhiraj at the door.

NINE

We still had a day ahead of the conference so Dhiraj asked me if I wanted to see around. I took no time in taking up the opportunity. We gobbled up the food together and we went out to explore the city.

The pink city.

Made so beautiful by Dhiraj's presence. I rediscovered the city through his lens. We went to see the Hawa Mahal, the Nahargarh Fort and the Jantar Mantar. We saw the breath taking view of Jal mahal. We heard our names echo from the roofs of those palaces.

Dhiraj was no longer a mentor to me. His sense of exploration, his sense of excitement affected in me a sense of childhood, of innocence, of friendship, of immaturity. I had forgotten myself. I submerged myself into the details of his speech, into the voice of his laughter.

Tired and exhausted we moved to our last site. We were at Nahargarh Fort watching the view of Jaipur at night. Our day was spent in a happy discovery of the city. We were a pair of Columbus who had discovered a paradise of our own; we owned our imagined land through a collected stream of memories. We had touched the cool walls of the palaces and walked in the hot sun. I had wrapped a thin cloth around my head the whole day; Dhiraj took several photos of me in that awful look. I was smiling and talking like myself in years. Away, in that strange city, a coloured city, I found the colours of my life coming back to me. It was a hot place that

flared my enthusiasm.

If Jaipur was beautiful during the day it was even more beautiful during the night. We were a part of a small group of tourists who stayed back to see the night view of the city.

I don't remember for how much time Dhiraj and I were standing without talking to one another as we took in the serene night atmosphere and it calmed us to silence and peace. I wanted to carry that transcendence when I went back to Delhi. I wanted to carry that independence and that reckless laughter with me when I went back to Delhi. I suddenly started longing for that view even while I was looking at it. I knew I was going to let go of everything once I went back. My eyes lowered in disappointment, in grief. Moisture collected in them and I could not look up to the view again. I was going to miss it for life; I was feeling the pangs of subservient existence again.

Suddenly, Dhiraj started a conversation with me.

"So everything ok at the home front, why did you come off so suddenly?" A boy came to offer some tea and we bought two cups of tea and we stood aloof from the tourist crowd.

"Yes, everything is ok." I replied.

I felt unease; he noticed and changed the topic.

"You know, I was in love once. Her name was Sati. She was so different from me you know. She wanted a home, kids. She wanted a husband who went to work regularly and came back home to her. She wanted to raise her kids. She wanted to decorate the home with her personal touch and cook great things for me." he chuckled as he told me about her.

"Then what happened?"

"Well I wanted different things from my life. I wanted to travel, I couldn't stay put in one place. Raising a family is a good idea but I didn't want to be chained down in the name of being a family man. So I gave up on her. So that she could have a man she wanted for the husband figure she imagined and she could be happy. We would have never been happy together. I grew scared of her to be very honest." He said laughing.

I told him, "Maybe you didn't love her enough that's why you didn't think of trying for her."

"My mother also said the same thing. Everyone in my family has been trying to get me married and to help me in settling down my life but I have triumph over them. What they call as settling would have been the greatest unsettling factor of my life."

"So do you know what happened to her after you left?"

"I heard she got married in a couple of years and she has children now, I guess she is happy."

I was enjoying the casual chat with my professor. That night we entertained each other like we were some old friends. The day's familiarity had made us drop our guards and we had cast away our reserved nature to the ruins of the ancient city.

"So where is your mother now?" I asked

"My mother is in Shimla, she is a teacher there."

"And your dad?" I asked, thinking that was the most obvious question.

He remained silent, he stared at the sky for a while, and I thought he was going to say his dad was dead and I had asked the wrong question but he said,

"I don't know about my dad, I have never seen him. I was raised by a single mother."

"Oh. I am sorry"

"No don't be sorry, I am very proud of my mother. She loved the man and he was unworthy of her that much I know. I don't want to meet my father, my mother is enough for me you know" he said chuckling, "you should meet my mother she is this strict woman who doesn't allow a toe out of the line."

We both laughed.

"That's why I am drawn out to the needs of women. I have seen how hard it is for a woman who is antagonised by the society. I have seen how the society always targeted my mother; it had always put her within the point blank range of their fingers. After she had me, she was no longer allowed to say what was right or wrong and when she did raise a voice, they reminded her of what she was. She has been a very strong lady and she raised me impeccably. Well, my mother is very proud of what I am doing today but she is very ambitious about getting me married. But I know if I were to marry my concerns will shift and there are simply so many things at hand to be done that I can't afford to risk that shift."

I admired that man ever more.

"I want women to come out of self-criticism and domesticity. I feel sorry for them when they are left to cut their own wings", he said. Then I felt a piercing pain in me, I imagined he was looking through me.

"So you had a love marriage?" he asked

I nodded. I was on my guard when he shifted the conversation

to me.

"Then you tried for your lover after all", he asked.

"Of course I did", I told him.

"And are you happy today?" he asked.

I remained silent. He had got where I didn't want to go.

"Well, that is a very subjective question. Every marriage has got its own concerns and problems."

He looked at me for some time and said very gently, "I think you are an amazing person. I can see your ambitions and your dedication and I can't help but admire you."

I looked in his eyes and I allowed myself to be carried away by the force of his words.

"You do?" I asked.

"Yes", he said softly, "I look at you and I see a strong young woman who is doing all she can to stay afloat. You must be going through a lot of struggle with your family members. I mean we don't find families say to their daughters-in-law 'go out girl in the world and get what you want, we are right behind you and we will support you in whichever way we can', right? "

"Yeah, that doesn't happen in our society", I said and my feelings were grieved.

"So can I ask a question?" he asked.

"Yeah"

"What are you searching for?"

"I want to research", I said quietly, trying to convince him.

"I am not sure if that's all you want", he said and he looked into my weak eyes and said, "I think you are in search of yourself. You are searching around people you can identify with and you get disappointed that they are even close to who you are. So you resume your endless journey towards self-discovery. You are, surely, searching for yourself."

A warm feeling erupted inside me for that stranger-teacher in my life, who had understood my desires in a span of few months and who had put my deepest ambition in clear words before me immaculately. I wanted to tell him, share with him at the cost of some embarrassment of what I was going through.

Words formed itself in the presence of his unfaltering and untarnished beacon and I led them to his ears to be heard, tearfully but unswervingly, "I am unhappy because I had forgotten myself for the sake of a relationship and that relationship has now turned its back on me. I ….."

I couldn't continue talking. Tears were swelling up in my eyes. I hid my face in my hands quickly and shamefully. Suddenly I hated the conversation I was having with Dhiraj. I didn't understand the nature of digging he was doing, I didn't understand what was it that he wanted me to reveal from the camouflage.

The tears I let out spoke more unheard words to him than my talking lips could ever utter. I was letting out everything in front of him. He took my hands down from my face, and he tried to console me.

"Hey, look at me. Come now. Look at me. Why do you cry like this? Everything is going to be alright. I am really sorry I think I

have been more than personal. Look at me. You make me curious you know."

I felt the weight of his trusting eyes when he said the last few words. We both looked at each other, and through the eyes; a bridge was made between the two hearts. The two bodies then reached out to each other, each coming from poles apart. There was a soft breeze as he held my face and he wiped the tears from my face steadily. He then pulled away some hair from my face gently. In the dark of the night, there was a magic spark and we felt our desires ignite, a magnet was at work and we were drawn to each other.

He bent his neck and softly kissed me. And in that moment, I felt what it must feel like, when two opposite shores meet.

I felt his lips touch mine; the hot breadths passed from one passage to another. The night froze in that culmination of a new era of love, the beginning from here on of denial and acceptance, of love and lust and of self-knowledge and the world. The world expanded in numerous sensations during that fraction of a moment. The picture of Harsh came flitting before my eyes, I started to feel myself in that moment; then it dawned upon me that I was with that man whom I couldn't name, to be in that state with that man, my moral demanded he had to be essentially my husband but I knew he could not qualify being one . A cold feeling of guilt crept up inside me through my feet. I opened my eyes. I saw him and I pushed him away from me.

I ran down to a bus stop where I took a bus to my hotel.

When I reached my hotel I ran for my room and locked myself in it. After an hour or so Dhiraj called me from the other side of the door, he pleaded to me to open the door. He apologised a number of times but I didn't dare open the door. I felt ashamed, ashamed of my misdeed. Every attempt to evaluate what had

happened turned into words “shame, shame, shame”. Opening the door to see Dhiraj meant facing my sin stark naked. I did not want to be tempted. I felt I was a weak person. I requested him to go away. I heard him no more and I had the room to myself to repent.

That vacant space of my life was filled with the memory of my sin. I lost control over my contradiction with tradition and culture. The empty room, my defiance; all at once turned against me. I found myself suddenly at the finger point of many accusations. Silent voices in the air became audible to me and I heard voices telling me,

“See what your defiance has brought you. Nothing but shame.”

“If only you were walking on the path of virtue this calamity could have been avoided.”

“This is what happens when women like you don’t listen to us.”

“Yes, such women begin to understand when it is too late, when they have already fallen.”

“Now live the rest of your life like a sinner. Regret, pay penance and restore your life.”

I felt myself facing an invisible judge, I was in a court room where the accused was I and I had no defence. Nobody in that court room supported me, I was alone. No man or woman stood up for me. Everybody stood silent when I was accused.

I saw Harsh in the far end of the room, he was hidden behind his manly figure and nobody saw him. Only I suffered. I felt threatened to submission. I fell on the ground. Then I fell from my resolution. I fell from my task. One moment of desire and I

was spurn out of the society of men head long. I quivered to think about my fate. I asked myself 'what will become of me'. 'Will I perpetually live in the blinding rays of this light house? Why did I stray away?' There was no lust, there was no recognition of love, it was purely an accident, didn't he apologise when he left. It was nothing but a nothing. There was only a moment.

There was a very low pitch voice within me that said something but I could hear nothing of it. I had to wait for silence among the crowd of accusing voices to hear to what it was saying. Finally when silence fell, it repeated what it was saying all along,

"You....have.....a.....right.....to be.....hap....py.....too"

The voice quivered and spoke very softly like it was afraid of everyone around. After these words were uttered, there was an uproar within me. So many voices spoke at once,

"Such blasphemy!

"That imbecile!"

"What does that lowly voice know about values?"

"Yes! What does he know about the sacred position of a woman?"

"That lowly voice! That selfish creed!"

"It does not know that a woman should not fall. That is why the society guard over her chastity so strictly, if she becomes impure what will happen to the offspring's, what will happen to the purity of the society."

"Yes! God has made women and He has endowed her with

forbearance so that she can nourish the society and can multiply humanity."

"Therefore, a woman is the sole asset of the society; she must obey the dogmas of a society she lives in and subject herself to its commands."

Under the learned and high voices, I cowered and the soft voice was never heard again from within me.

TEN

Next morning I set out for the conference and I met Dhiraj among the members so there was no chance for awkward inquiries. I placed myself as far as possible from him. I didn't know how I was going to stand his company for a week. I blamed myself for everything that had happened between us because it was I who was attracted to him and it was I who was always mesmerized by his presence. My previous thoughts kept coming to me and it became a constant source of embarrassment with me. I tried to let it go but it retained it station, right at the door of my conscience.

Dhiraj couldn't concentrate on the conference either. He kept looking at me. I felt I was distracting him. I thought it was unacceptable for a man like him to be a victim of something called nothing and to divert himself from his goals, I just couldn't take it. I made plans to leave after the conference. But something inside me said,

'The conference? It's important!'

I told myself I was being more righteous by staying away from Dhiraj. Yes, I thought of leaving. I removed myself from the on-going conference and reached my hotel. Tears of regret swelled up in my eyes.

I was crying and I was packing my stuffs. I didn't know what was to become of my research. Everything was in a dark umbra zone. It defied the least possibility of visibility. I packed faster thinking along, thinking I packed, nothing was in order, the bag

was disarrayed with clothes and soon the clothes fell out and I sat there defeated. There was a knock on the door. I opened it. It was Dhiraj.

"May I come in?" he asked.

I came inside, timid.

"You have already started packing, I see", he started and he began to try to convince me of the mistake we made, "Look, we are both very mature people and I am older than you and I know that things happens sometimes. But it doesn't mean that you have to run away from everything. We can handle this. I take full responsibility over what has happened and I want to assure you that nothing of the sort will happen again. I will personally see to it that we engage ourselves in nothing but a student to teacher relationship or a professional, scholar to scholar relationship. If you wish to leave for home, I will not stop you but because you want to avoid me, if you hurt your studies and your career I will blame myself for the rest of my life. I don't want to do that. So please, go home if you wish but please don't abandon your studies."

I heard his words; I was turned away from him. I turned towards him when there was silence and when I had heard the clicking noise of the door getting shut. He was gone.

It was a nice paradox. All the while when I was being ashamed of what had happened, I felt suddenly a vacuum within the premise of my life. He had left and I was leaving. Things were never going to be the same for us. No innocent merry making at the NGO, no sitting down in a coffee house to talk without feeling a pang of an impending infidelity. I had lost the only source of joy.

I reached home; my feet touched its dreadful steps. Being at the threshold brought me no respite, no joy. I was aware that a conflict was waiting for me.

I pushed the door, it was locked. I took the keys and opened the door. I made it inside and I pushed my suitcase aside and flopped myself on the couch. I hadn't slept the entire night so I gravely wanted to sleep. I made my way upstairs silently under the gloom of my morbid mood to approach my room. As I got nearer I heard voices. But the voices where not conversing with each other. Besides, there was nobody in the house, I knew the parents had gone to Aunt Kalindi's place as my father-in-law, always accompanied her whenever she came without her husband and I took it for granted that Harsh was in his office. I grew afraid and with very cautious steps I approached my room.

Suddenly, there was a shriek. I shuddered. The shriek turned into a moan and through the door of my bedroom that stood slightly ajar, I saw Harsh making love to his mistress. He was mounted on her and he kept thrusting himself into her and the woman was dying of pleasure. She was mid-way between shrieking and moaning. Apparently, they thought they had the whole house to themselves during their lustful hour. I clasped my hands at my mouth and made a run for the door. I picked up the suitcase and went to my parents' place. I was out of myself. I had lost voice.

They were worried to see me with the suitcase. I told them I wanted to study peacefully for a few days. They asked if Harsh had dropped me and I told them Harsh was in the office but he knew. I told them I wanted to rest and I retired into my room. My parents felt something was out of its place.

Inside my room, I sat on the bed, clutching the pillow to myself and I cried. The images of their love-making kept playing before my eyes and I tried to wipe it out of my memory by closing my eyes and I clasped my hands over my ears to mute the noises they were making. I was going mad with torment inside me. I could not scream to the images to go away.

Day after day, I went into a silent reverie. I kept myself to my

room, pretending to be studying. While I was in my room, I stared outside the window and I saw kids playing, men working, and women going about. I questioned nothing. I questioned no one anymore. I had given up myself entirely to my fate. I had given up.

The meaningless trials had wrenched my heart away, took away all my faith. Those trials were meaningless because nothing in this world has got any permanence, every situation is as temporary as life itself but then I wondered how and why the temporality of emotions hurt us. After all, I had known Harsh was in a relationship and I had stopped bothering myself over the why and how between me and Harsh, but having seen the hopelessness of our marriage so naked and shrieking on my very bed, I began to uproot myself from humanity itself.

Without that marriage for which I had left my family, my life, my career, I didn't know what I was going to do. Without that marriage I was lost, I had proved myself incapable not as a wife but incapable as a decision-maker.

I was lost, truly lost. I wanted to distance myself from my marriage and I yearned to find the oasis in the land of Sorrow. A realization dawned upon me over the nature of the so-called love itself. Love took the shape of a mirage, you are happy as long as the spectre is from a distance. The vision rests the heart in the midst of the hot trials of a man's journey. But if you go to have it for your possession it will vanish and you return to your trying journey again.

I stayed at home most of the time. My mom and dad took me out at evenings for a walk. I was led by my parents and they tried to guide me to happiness even when my boat was beginning to break and it was about to sink. I called up my parents-in-law that I was in my parents place and I informed them I was going to stay there for some time. They did not seem pleased at all.

My neighbours started noticing me. Initially, they were happy to see me. But when they saw me for a week, they raised their eyebrows. Many of them made a point to deliberately say,

'Oh, hello, you are still here?'

I got all their hints. I felt angry. What business did they have in others' affairs? It was my parents' house after all, I was raised in it and if I wanted to stay for a whole year, what business did they have poking their noses into matters of others. One afternoon, Mrs. Kausikh came over for tea. Just when I was outside to get some water, I heard her asking if anything was the matter.

I felt angry but I couldn't say anything. I had lost the power to even vent out. I stood there imagining myself telling her awful things but I couldn't bring myself to fight with the injustice. The glass in my hand fell on the floor but I stood before her, staring into her eyes. She stood up timidly and said a goodbye to my mother and left. By evening there was a rumour that my marriage was in trouble.

I realized my presence was creating problems for my parents. It was time I made my exit, so a few days later; I went back to the Land of Sorrow.

ELEVEN

I went back and I was received with a cold shoulder. Apparently, Aunt Kalindi had left very displeased with me, she had sworn not to set foot in our house again. Nobody was talking to me; it was a normal ordeal. That peace lasted for two weeks. I used to work myself up when I encountered such behaviour initially but later on I got used to it.

I used to think it's a virtue to be happy for everyone in the family when they were happy, but there were times when I felt everyone should also be happy because I was happy. But my happiness, my wants and my desires pricked them and as if when a servant asks for more than he deserves and he is reprimanded for it; my wants, my happiness and my desires brought to me only conflicts.

One day, I was standing among the gallery of books in the library; there was a window by my side. A small window just to let some air in and beyond the window was a small jungle of green trees, a wild garden beside the library that housed many birds. There, I had often seen the peacocks feed themselves on the berries. That day too, I saw a peacock, perched on the branch of a tree. It was a fully grown peacock and it sat with all its majesty on the branch unaware that it was a cause of someone's spectacle and admiration. I kept looking at it. I couldn't walk away from it. I looked at the austere of its tail, the long feathers, and the beauty of it which was deemed to be fit to decorate the head of a god.

The vision of the peacock provoked so many thoughts inside

me. In the animal kingdom, which is considered to be below the human world, the male attempted to attract the female and only by her consent he copulated with the female and she reproduced. The female in the natural, raw order of the world, has an incomprehensible animate voice to choose her mate, to provide her consent. The birds are the best examples and during nesting, both the male and the female built the nest, when the eggs hatch both the father and the mother feed the young birds.

It seemed to me as the animal clan grew in size and in intellect, there came about a gradual degradation of mutual acceptance and accommodation. The highest animal clan with the greatest intellect being man, the order of the raw world is the exact contrary among man. In our world, women and men have separate fields of existence. Women at home and the men in the world. Today when women have started occupying the space beyond home, it is still her primary duty to look after home and the kids. There is no societal pressure on the men to bear the weight with the women.

There is no respite for women, no equality, no accommodation, and no acceptance in a man's society. Myths, dogmas, beliefs, customs only act to marginalise women. Our society is covered with a thick film of hypocrisy.

In Christian parables, womb was given to women by god's curse, it was meant to be a punishment for disobedience. But the instrument of retribution was used to reproduce the same god, to bring a religion of god into this world. One is likely to say God is humble and modest and above all kind, but I would like to question to the omniscient God. Why did He bring the very instrument, through which the birth of His religion was going to be pledged, as a matter of a curse?

Among the myriad gods of the Hindus, the goddesses hold a very special power in our households, but such a tradition has not been able to make people realize the powerlessness of their

household women. They have not realized that every incarnation of the gods into this world was brought by the women, the earthly mothers. We have come to distance the deity and the woman, and so women in large are mere women and not a reflection of the divine image. Ironically and paradoxically, women have become proven puppets played not only by the whims of man but there are divine whims playing with her too.

As civilization grew, knowledge grew, science grew and commerce grew too. Man expanded their world in unthinkable sophisticated ways. Then, there came a period in history when women were turned to assets, daughters were given away with some wealth until the tradition took the form of greed and many daughters were burned in the name of dowry system. It is strange to imagine the beginning of such a custom.

Even if we imagined a utopic past in ancient India where men and women were equal and daughters were entitled to a share of the property of the father and she was given the same property at the time of her marriage, such suppositions can't answer how exactly the tradition turned hostile to women.

Burning seems to be special to the Indian scenario; Sita had chosen to burn herself to pass the test of chastity, and women have burned themselves on their husband's pyres. Now, women are burned in domestic violence, they are burned for dowry, they are burned because they failed to deliver a male child, they are raped and then burnt. It is redundant to say that women who are in a commanding position often are responsible for the atrocities on other women. It's as if we are programmed to hate each other. But to me such hatred represented itself as a pictorial ideology of the colonial idea of divide and rule. Since ages, women have been divided by a mutual hate aroused by tradition. We concisely measure each other on the scale of tradition to say how good or bad we are, one man murdering another for values and tradition, one woman playing against another to outshine each other in values and

tradition.

There were many intriguing thoughts in my mind, thoughts in the form of questions with an untraced history, the answer can only be conceptualized and whatever led to rape, dowry, and other ritualistic and dogmatic sufferings now women are faced with the dire position of their own security. Our own tradition turning against us, living with us like a step-mother who calls us her children but who finds for us only a servile existence more fitting than a livelihood with independent identity, freedom and choices.

My thoughts ended abruptly, somebody dropped a book near me. I broke away from my train of thoughts and faced my books. I wanted to go to the NGO and start work there again.

TWELVE

Queer are the ways of God. He made the world and made hell and heaven for the bad and the good, and we all know that to pursue what is wrong and evil entails to life in hell. But despite this religious ultimatum, people don't refrain from doing wrong. When hell is not enough to lead people to righteousness, when the curiosity of the evil is more than the will to achieve heaven, when the self means more than anything else, the victim often suffers the torment of being cheated than the perpetrator who knows he has cheated.

I had gone back to my husband's place; my parents had come to drop me of. My parents-in-law received them in peace and cordiality, but when they had left, I was left alone to face the trial of a wife ostracized for following her will.

When I had retired into my room, my mother-in-law especially came into my room, coldly but quite in control she told me what evil things I had done, she did not fail to tell me that they were ashamed of my conduct, she told me that I had lost all respect for them and I didn't care for them. I listened to her. I didn't say anything. She thought I was being impudent as I didn't explain myself but I knew if I had answered her she was going to think I was impudent anyways. So I remained silent and let her interpret whichever way she wished.

At night, Harsh returned home. My whole body trembled when I saw him. I could not bear to live with him under the same roof. My existence with my husband and his parents turned into a

continuous trial for me.

My life had drastically changed after marriage but the hopes and the expectations of finding another family after marriage were yet to be met. I had migrated into an entirely new territory where I had to learn everything. In the new set up what struck me most was the general antipathy and distrust without a cause I received. I thought it was natural to be distrustful towards a new person but the distrust and the antipathy was genetically coded into the society by tradition, such that every new woman in the household appeared to the elders like a ticking time-bomb that could explode any minute. They saw that the new woman needed to be tamed and controlled.

So every work I did, every word I said was interpreted in the house. I was expected to be very good mannered, very cordial. I was expected to clean the house and to take delight in feeding my family. I was expected to wear the traditional dress of a married woman; I was expected to talk very respectfully to them. I was expected to put my family ahead of my own interests. And I did everything to make them happy, but being humans by manner of work or opinion, I differed from them and those were the times when I felt the power exercised on me.

I eventually started feeling I was living among strangers. Every work, every word, every manner of mine was tested in their private laboratory of their mental hemisphere. The charm of a family life where one found love and support was not there for me anymore. I felt in the weariness of my existence some unseen, invisible chains around my legs, I felt the strangling pain of chains that covered and adorned my neck and it slackened my pace, my existence to constraints.

That night, after coming back from my parents place, I found it very hard to face Harsh in the room alone. I saw him lie down comfortably on the bed ready to sleep. Standing at the door, I

looked at him for a while; I wondered how a man was so free of his conscience. I did not want to sleep in the same bed with him. I did not want to sleep with him ever again. The irreparable damage that alienated me to everything in my married home had finally taken place. I did not know how my future living among strangers was going to be.

He saw me and I moved towards the bed. He started saying he was sorry for whatever Aunt Kalindi did, apparently he felt some empathy for me, he knew it was wrong for Aunt Kalindi to have subjected me to all those humiliations but I also knew he was not going to say a thing to his parents about it, leave the least to talk to Aunt Kalindi for me. His words usually took birth within the privacy of thoughts and space in our bedroom and they died a premature death unable to take birth and sustain themselves.

I didn't say anything to him and I went to the closet and took out a small mattress, I put it down on the floor and covered it with a neat bedcover and took out some spare pillows from the closet as well.

"Why are you sleeping down on the floor?"

I didn't say anything to him. I lied down and I pretended to sleep. Seeing the failure of words to bring any kind of reconciliation between us, he put off the lights and he went to sleep as well.

The next day, I worked through my chores silently. I stayed at home not knowing where to go. The strangles of my personal life suffocated me for any kind of creative ability. I could not move myself to concentrate on my studies, nor could I move myself to be contented at home.

My mother-in-law had started seeing me and noticed my morose behaviour. One day when father was away, she came to me.

"There you are. You are always either studying or working and nobody is at home. It's not nice to stay together and stay away from each other. Come, why don't the two women talk and gossip a little." She said lightly.

She came and set on the bed, she asked me to sit with her but I suggested I liked the drawing room better and it was more comfortable so we went to sit ourselves in the drawing room. I was nervous at the show of her sudden frankness. She was never like that to me. She had never talked to me so lightly. All the air of authority had vanished and she was making me sceptical.

"How are your parents?"

I answered they were alright.

I went silent again.

"How is everything between you and Harsh?"

She began to aim for the bull's eye. I lost control at the sudden ambush, I was disarmed. I remained silent and after a minute or so, I replied everything was alright.

"Dear, if something is the matter please feel free to talk to me today. I know you are distressed about something."

She said everything in a very concerned way that my poor sentiments started giving way. At the show of such maternal care, my heart burst with some profusion of tears.

"See, tell me everything", she said.

She consoled me by padding me on my shoulder.

"There is someone else in Harsh's life", I simply said. My mother-in-law gapped,

"I hadn't believed when you had told us, I never can believe my son can do this."

She held her forehead and took some time to take in the severity of the situation. Then she continued asking, "When did you know?"

I said, "At the time I took my admission in the University. It's been nearly a year now."

With wide eyes she again said, "My own son and such deeds. I still can't believe it."

"It's alright" I said, "It's easier to believe the girl wrong"

Then she turned to me and almost with a very pained voice, she said, "I know you have suffered much. I have also seen my mother suffer in the hands of her parents-in-law and I used to think I will never accept such behaviours or I will never hurt my own daughter-in-law but you see, women are not free to decide over their own feelings too. When I came into this house, your Aunt Kalindi did everything to turn me into her own exact replica so that in the future, in her absence particularly, she would be assured that the house would be running according to her rule-book. I have also suffered a period of much torment in her hands, my husband, your father-in-law followed her words so there was none to talk to about it and you see even today, your father is bent on the fact that the house must be maintained the way his sister had left. I have only followed his commands and everything has been well."

I took in that outpour of her heart without scepticism now.

She continued, "you must be wondering why such revelations

now? After four years of your married life and after having been disinterested in your pursuits. You are wondering right? But I am a selfish person. Being the Indian woman, my husband's joy meant heaven for me, and now I want to save my son and make him happy too. I cannot make my son happy without you. You might think every ounce of love for you in his heart has dried up but I know that he still loves you. Believe that he has strayed away from you and arouse love in him again. Have your faith in him again. Talk to him about kids. Having children does wonder to a man."

I was picking up interest in her outpouring but after hearing to her last few words I had lost interest in her, I lost believe in her that, that woman had started to feel anything genuine for me. She wanted to save her family and not save me. If for her, I stayed with Harsh and somehow if I had children with him, nothing was going to change for me. I was disgusted. I wanted to stand up and walk away from the conversation. I was actually saved from doing so by a woman who came running into the house holding an infant.

She was distressed and she kept crying for help even while we were trying to calm her down. Two men came behind her, one was older and the other appeared like her husband. He said, "What is this madness Gopi? If you have anything to say come back home and let's talk. What's the meaning of this?"

THIRTEEN

I knew that woman. I had seen her a couple of times. She was with a full belly when I had seen her last. That day, I saw in her arms she had delivered a baby. I saw she had suffered a few bruises and I understood the men had been thrashing her. Her husband almost advanced to get hold of her and I intervened. I told him to leave her alone. He said it was there personal matter. But I threatened him that since it was my house it was no longer their personal matter. I asked him to leave and I clearly told him that if he didn't leave quietly, I was going to call the police.

He cowered before my threat and went away with his father. I turned to Gopi who was extremely terrified and I went to the kitchen to get some ice for her bruises. My mother-in-law followed me to the kitchen and asked me not to interfere in their matter. She asked me to take the lady to her house. I didn't say anything to her. I listened to her and went back to Gopi.

I asked Gopi how he got her bruises. Crying very bitterly, she told me how her husband and his family wanted to give away her newly born daughter to some orphan home as they didn't want a girl, and they had wanted a boy.

I called up Dhiraj and some of our NGO members and I took Gopi to the police station. I reached the police station first along with Gopi. When I asked the sitting constable where I could file an FIR for the lady, he blatantly told me they didn't take such cases. He told us such cases were fought in the courts. I was ignorant about the procedures in the police stations and in the courts, police

stations and courts having been stereotyped as places not fit for respectable people. Generations in my family had never been in a police station and even when the need arose, they simply avoided going there. I stupidly took his words and I called up Dhiraj to tell him what the constable had told me. He told me to wait at the police station for him. While we were waiting for Dhiraj, the constable tried to drive us away saying no cases could be registered in that police station but I remained adamant.

After some time, Dhiraj came with his colleagues and he told the constable that they wanted to file an FIR against Gopi's husband and his family members. The constable gave him the same reply. Unlike me, Dhiraj made sure the constable paid for his lexity.

Dhiraj called up the SHO of that police station. He informed the SHO that he was at the gate. When the SHO came out to receive him, he saw us arguing with the constable. He approached us and greeted Dhiraj.

Dhiraj told the SHO what the constable had told us and he was suspended for a week after that for his lexity and unprofessional conduct. I knew I was lucky because Dhiraj knew the SHO of the police station. The case was registered and Gopi's husband was called for questioning.

While Gopi was homeless with her child, she stayed in the Hostel of our NGO. Her parents lived in another city so they were unaware of Gopi's circumstances but as soon as they were informed about what had happened to Gopi, they took the first flight and came to see her.

After days of suffering through my internal turmoil, I felt peace again. It was like the first shower after a period of draught and I wanted to jump and dance in that shower of peace and joy.

Prophets and poets have described heaven in many blissful ways.

Accordingly, we have come to an understanding of heaven as a place of ultimate peace, of serene music, of sublime rest, of the greenest trees, of the most colourful flowers and fruits, of water fountains, of golden palaces, of diamond carved passages but even so we don't know much about heaven. We have only been able to measure heaven and hell according to our material perception of bliss and torment.

When I had rescued Gopi and when I saw her smile to her child and when I saw her showering kisses on the little soul in her arms, it was an assurance that they were going to be happy together. I could not describe the emotions that were being played between the mother and the daughter, I wanted to call it heavenly but I did not find its comparison to any golden palaces, or fountains or music or colourful flowers and fruits. But somehow, my dilemma of not been able to describe the scene made me sure to acknowledge it as heavenly.

There was an undercurrent of some unspoken words between me and Dhiraj; I felt it and I understood that somehow we understood each other. In that connection which I understood but I could not explain, I felt my existence starting to revolve around, maintain a gravity of peace, of sustainable happiness.

But I didn't want to indulge into that world somehow. Seeing it from a distance brought me a lot of joy in itself. It was like a mirage. I feared going near it. I started talking to Dhiraj as before. So unconditionally my aspirations, my studies were back on track again.

I was experiencing with Dhiraj the much awaited mutual acceptance and accommodation I yearned for from my family.

Harsh's mother began to counsel her son to build relations with me, she didn't mention she knew about his affair but she called him out towards his duties as a husband. He was counselled to

spent time with me, to think about moving ahead in the marriage and to consider about kids as well. She added very emotionally that at her age she wanted to hear the noise of kids in her home, she wanted the company of her grandchildren.

Harsh went into the bedroom bewildered, not knowing what to do. He could not ignore his mother's words. He went into my study room but I was not there, he saw some forms on the table. I had started applying to some University hostels. It was becoming unbearable to share a living space with Harsh. With the collapse of my faith in Harsh, the fortress started breaking, making holes on the walls through which I attempted to slip out to my freedom.

He saw the forms and he grew concerned. He felt for the first time I was planning to leave him. He knew that everything of the emotions and the love between us was lost but he was desperate to stop me.

He came into the bedroom where I was lying already. He went for a quick shower and while he was changing he started conversing with me.

"How was your day?"

I said it was fine. I didn't bother to ask of his day. He came to me and he laid himself down beside me. I was exasperated but I hid it. He lied down and propped up his head on his palm with his elbow on the bed and he started asking if we could talk a little more, he wanted to talk.

"I have work tomorrow; I don't think I want to stay up late." I told him.

"Oh come on, for an hour or so?" he asked

He touched my hand and caressed my chin with his finger. I

turned side, excusing myself. He came close to me and his body touched me, he put his arm round my waist and whispered in my ears,

"You know I think we should have kids by now. Let's go up on the bed."

He started kissing my neck, and far from being aroused I stood up and asked him,

"If you don't want to sleep inside the room you can go out."

He sat up alarmed,

"What happened?"

I answered with rage, "nothing happened. That's just the thing between us now, nothing can ever happen."

"But I am trying..." he protested.

"Oh please, I don't want you to shower your feelings on me like a charity."

"But why should you react like this? You went all mute yourself."

I wanted to walk out of the room but he held me back. I wrenched myself away from him. At that point, I was yelling at him at the top of my breath.

"You can replace me with your mistress, you can bear the idea of not talking to me, not to make love to me but you want your children from me. So we should be breeding now so that I can reproduce some children for you and your family."

He stared at me. It was the first time we were confronting the fact of his infidelity.

"If you think I will give importance to someone else…" he started saying.

"Of course you give her importance that why you had sex with her on my bed."

He was spell-bound. He looked at me with shocked eyes. One truth uttered, and all lies came crumbling down.

"Stop playing with me, please Harsh. I was right there within the range of your moaning and shrieking. I saw the naked truth of our married life on my very bed. Why do you have to stoop so low as to lie to me? Again and again and again? If you want someone else just admit-the-truth!"

Harsh remained silent for a while, and he looked at me again and he started saying something like, "if you know so much you should also hear why it all happened." But I wasn't interested and I left the room, he remained in his room mumbling his own words.

FOURTEEN

I had started going to the NGO very regularly. Helping the cause of the helpless women broke me away from my own helplessness temporarily. We were preparing to organise an exhibition for the women.

On the day of the event, we had put on display whatever arts and handicraft work the women had made. It was very motivating. We had invited some ministers to attend the event, to encourage the women.

The women in the hostel had been preparing for the event since two or three months ahead. A public ground was booked in advance for the event. Some newspapers had also agreed to advertise for the exhibition. As a result, we saw people flocking inside the ground to see the exhibition. Among them were so many entrepreneurs, so many who ran similar NGOs and so many youngsters. There came a pile of encouragement for the women from every section of the society.

Some women got money, others got patrons for their interest in arts, some women got employment, and I felt everything was moving ahead in a positive direction.

Dhiraj and I grew together all the more during all the work we did together. We realized we were entering a very mature, unspoken yet understood relationship with each other. A relationship of mutual support and respect. I realized my feelings towards him were not a matter of just respect. But I feared in recognizing it and

he did not compel upon me to recognize him. He was happy just being there with me and so was I, happy just being with him, doing the things I wanted, things that mattered to me , alongside him.

Our three days exhibition soon came to a close very soon. It had been a very motivating and successful event. When we had wrapped everything up at the ground, it was already 8 pm. I was in a panic because I knew everybody was waiting for me at home, I had never been so late before and Harsh kept calling me about my where about. I received his call once then twice but when it felt like a nagging pang, I told him I was trying to get out earlier but I couldn't so I was going to be late. I couldn't leave the exhibition earlier.

Harsh also got late from work at times, he always called me up to tell me he was going to be late because of work. I had always been complacent thinking it was work. But somehow it seemed like Harsh couldn't take it lying flat that I was late because of work; he kept calling me in every two minutes to ask if I was out of the place.

Seeing my anxiety, Dhiraj proposed to drop me, but I had to turn down the offer. I was afraid to be alone with him and if anyone from home saw me coming with a man in the late hours of night, everything was going to turn against me.

I walked out on the road alone; it was dark except for the dim street lamps. I saw Dhiraj enter his car, he was looking at me. He gave me a call from his car. He told me he was leaving once I got on an auto or something. I waited but there was no auto coming my way. I waited for nearly half an hour but there was no auto around. The place was too desolate for regular autos to come by.

Dhiraj was still waiting without imposing upon me to sit in his car. I started walking towards his car thinking he could help

me catch an auto. Suddenly, there came a car with some five boys in it. They stopped by me and asked if they can drop me. I started walking away from them. Just then they came out of their car and finding the place deserted with just a lady alone, they held me back and pushed me on the ground.

"Stop pretending sweetie pie, we know what adventurous ladies like you go around in the night for. We will give it to you pussy." The boy who stood above me said.

Dhiraj got out of his car and shouted at them, but they were too confident of their number. They laughed at him while they were trying to hold me down and get through my resistance. One of them slapped me and tore my shirt open.

Dhiraj gave a quick call to the police and put the alarm of his car on. There were some members of our NGO still inside the ground, on hearing the alarm they came out. The guard at the far end of the gate came on hearing the alarm. By that time the boys had started to disperse because of the alarm, on seeing the people come their way they thought it better to leave. So they hopped on into their car and drove away. Dhiraj quickly noted the number and pulled me up and covered me in his shirt. He then called the police and gave the number of the car.

I was in a state of shock. I held on to Dhiraj for some sense of security while I wasn't even aware that I was shedding tears.

He offered to take me home, but I refused him in a panic for fear that Harsh and his parents could see me like that, they were going to think I had entered into some liaison with Dhiraj or even if they believed something bad had happened to me they were going to blame me. On such a pretext, I knew I was going to be encased at home, only for the sake of my own security.

I felt helpless, my fear gave way to tears, I felt so ashamed and

I felt so afraid. Dhiraj hugged me and took me to his home. In his place, I changed into his fresh light clothes but I could not come out of the shock of such an incident that had happened to me. A stream of silent tears floored my face while I looked ahead in mute silence. I sat on his couch, and he brought some water for me. I had the water and I looked at him.

"Do you want to talk to your husband?" he asked tenderly, I said no to him.

"Hey it's alright; it was a bunch of mad boys who will be booked for their madness. It wasn't your fault."

He gave me some sandwiches but I couldn't eat. He then showed me the way to his bedroom, he told me to go and take some rest. He told me he was going to sleep on the couch. I went inside his bedroom and I lay myself on his bed.

My thoughts were still stuck within the reel of that incident; the image of me almost raped was frozen in my memory. But from that frozen mosaic stemmed forth a seed of thought and courage. The lowly voice inside me came back to life and it spoke to me vociferously that if I had to die I might as well die happy. I put off the light in my room. I opened the window; it had started to rain heavily. I remained a long while looking out of the window. It had been a long hot day; the rain drenched the grass below. Everything was soaked in a quenching wetness. I felt the cold wet air brush against my body. I felt like some divine purity touched me. I opened the door of the balcony and I walked forth slowly. In getting myself wet that night, I felt a cleansing I had never felt before, like I was going under the Ganges.

I leaned on to the dictates of my heart, and I believed in the honesty of the new desire that I was a creature of God devoid of societal make-up, and as free to fall as Adam and Eve; and choose a fate and a destiny for myself. He came with silent steps and

stood at the door, watching me with keen eyes. He didn't take any more steps towards me to reach me, as if he was afraid he was going to be burned in that stormy night of passion.

He looked at me, and we kept watching each other for a while. Both our eyes invited each other to come to a union in love.

"We need not play with fire", he cautioned me.

"If everything has to take its course, if chastity can be violated without wishing for it, then why shouldn't we die a happy death, doing what we want and following our hearts and desires?" I replied.

He looked at me for a while longer and he too came in the rain. He held my hands in his and he pulled me inside the room. There, the shaking hands met the shaking breaths in privacy and for a moment I began to think about what I was doing.

"You don't mean whatever you said." He said in a husky voice.

The overflowing emotion made me fear myself, I nearly wanted to walk away from him, and I tried escaping what I wanted, what I desired, and something that was within my grasp at that time. But I had already signed up my accomplice, he was there, he did not let me go.

"Don't turn away, not tonight." He said.

And then everything became life to me.

It was life to life again.

It was love to love.

It was a man and a woman.

It was nothing besides them.

It was nothing beyond them.

It was the beginning of the world where there was nothing but the human heart.

The heavy rain was our only amorous spectator; the dark silent room bore the testimony to the joy experienced that night. My lover loved me as he willed and he tore me away petal after petal.

We were senseless of time. There was a phone ringing in the other room, but unheard, untamed and blind in the engulfing fire, we asked the night to let us live in the ignorance of the darkness, to let the fire of the love guide us only to more darkness and we left to the sun to bring unto us the world we wanted to leave.

FIFTEEN

I managed to violently tear myself away from any guilt feeling. The trauma of a love marriage that turned loveless had provoked no sense of guilt in me anymore.

Each morning I woke up with happy thoughts, like a young maiden who was in love for the first time. Life had become a curious mixture of everything I wanted. I existed with the legitimate but lived through the illegimate.

I moved around with Dhiraj wherever he went, I helped him in whatever he did. Suddenly, our conversations had become unrestricted. We constantly talked and discussed about a lot of issues, we felt free to call each other at any hour of the day or night. I didn't check if Harsh was sleeping, I simply walked out of the room to talk to Dhiraj. I didn't hide the matter that I was getting intimate with Dhiraj from Harsh.

My husband and his family had lost all hopes of my recovery. They probably thought I was turning mad with ambitions. They mocked at me and made fun of me behind my back.

I cared nothing of the mockery anymore. Although I used to leave home on the pretext of work and studies, I made plans to spend the weekends at Dhiraj's home. He had given me a duplicate key to his apartment. So I was in possession of a home away from home.

We entered the kitchen together and made breakfast together.

Everything was different with Dhiraj. We did every domestic chore together. When I cleaned his house, he cleaned with me. When I cooked, he stood along with me and he cooked along with me. We went to the groceries together. At times after an afternoon nap together, I found a mug of hot coffee waiting for me.

Away from legitimacy, we found independence and a will to non-conformity in illegitimacy. Whenever Dhiraj slept late, he wrote little notes asking me to wake him up at a certain hour. He never failed to write an 'I love you' at the end of each note. I recalled in the last few days Dhiraj had said more 'I love you' than my husband had in the last four years. I thought of Harsh at times, I could not help bring a comparison between the two men and the thoughts about Harsh brought to me only stress and sadness.

I never felt with Dhiraj I had to meet a dateline. We worked when we had to work. We talked about every possible thing from research to NGO issues. We made love when we wanted to. We had no reservations from each other. We could arouse each other with the touch of a finger. We relished each moment with each other and above all we deeply relished each other.

I felt every beat of my pulse with Dhiraj so I realized that was life for me.

SIXTEEN

When I had begun to keep myself busy all the time, my mother-in-law hired a maid servant for the house. I had never talked to her. But one day, when I was nearly leaving, she asked me to help her out with the work. She wanted to leave earlier as one of her children was sick at home. As we worked together, I entered into a conversation with her.

"How many kids do you have?" I asked her.

She answered nine.

"What!" the answer shocked me out of my wits. She didn't seem any older than I am; she had a very thin lean body. I asked her how old she was; she told me she was 30. I had never had the opportunity to talk to maid servants before; my mother was a woman who had some satisfaction in doing the house work on her own. She then told me her story.

She was married when she was 13 years old to a boy who was six or seven years older than her. She had her first baby when she was 16. She had suffered a miscarriage before that, but after her first baby she told me God had blessed her with eight more kids. I asked her why they had so many kids; she told me it all depended on what God gave them and how the man used her.

Then she went on to give me some intimate details of her married life. Her husband was a labourer, much older than her. She told me it was difficult adjusting to him all the time.

"I did not even understand what happened in marriages, Madam. My mother had only told me I should do everything that my husband wanted. She had told me every woman had to go through it and I would get used to it. That night, when he entered my room to sleep with me I was really scared. He was drunk too, and then he started undressing me. I screamed for help but everybody thought it was normal for girls to scream on first nights and so he forced himself on me that night. I used to dread spending nights with him but I have got used to him now by God's mercy. But even now, he is a very passionate man. I have asked him we already have nine children, I have many things to look after but he doesn't understand."

I was very sad to hear her story.

"But don't you go to a doctor to seek for some advice?" I asked her.

"Madam, who can afford doctors when we have to fight for a square meal. I have nine children to feed. But yes when I was 21, after continuously giving birth to 4 kids, I was very ill and I was taken to a government hospital where the lady doctor had advised me to take some medicine or use what was that? KAN-DUMS."

"So did you take the medicines or use condoms?" I asked

"I wanted to take the medicine but to spend money on it became problematic, the government hospitals provided them with lesser costs but it was bothersome. And my husband did not want to use the KAN-DUMS; he said he did not like it and he said it was embarrassing asking for it at the chemist. Besides even that costs money."

Then I inquired after the children, if they were healthy, if they were sent to schools.

"The first three kids are already 12, 11 and 10 years old, so they are already employed. They don't go to schools. The younger kids look after the youngest ones. Our condition has improved since the kids have been employed. I never used to think I would take up a job but because of pressing conditions I had to start working. The man wants his drinks and I have been compelled to look after nine children alone."

I was shocked to hear her story. It seemed very unlikely that such a thing could be happening around me.

When I reached the office of the NGO, I briefed everyone of what had happened in the morning. We felt we had to do something. Whatever we were doing was not going to avail any benefits with so many illiterate children coming up, with so many young girls getting married so early in their early teens.

I came up with an idea that we could form teams and go to slum areas to educate the people. There were so many government facilities available for them but they were not aware of them.

I formed a team of four men and two women; I also incorporated some five or so young volunteers. We started going out to various slum areas in early mornings. We used to take some snacks and tea for them so that by way of free food they could be induced to come to listen to us.

We entered the muddy terrain where insects, animals, dirt and humans lived in a co-habitat. Standing among them, the men talked to men and the women took the women slum dwellers away in some other part of the slum to educate them of their more private ordeals and needs. We counselled men and women to plan for their families, we told them not to compromise with their health and the health of their kids. We told them about free government schools and the meal plans. They were educated about where free medicines could be available.

After that venture in the slum, I took a pledge for a revolution. I thought some models of community schools which could work for the children in the slums. We wrote to the Human Resource Ministry to help us in setting up community schools in the slum areas.

In a corner of the slum, our volunteers set up a small class room where we gathered some two or three kids to start the school. As we marched ahead, our movement and ideals received recognition from electronic and print media. They sponsored us and promoted our campaign. They called out for participants and as a result, by the hordes of supporters, we created a new class of social engineers who wanted to design the lives of the poor for the betterment.

We had a long way to go with the community schools. I knew that those men and women were not open to changes so quickly, but we had to try and hound them to accept the changes until accepting became more normal than rejecting.

Some of our workers went door to door for donations. We did not only receive money but, in the process, we also got some blankets, toys, some clothes, some grains of rice, wheat and pulses. We organized the stuffs in packages and gave them to the children, for them to give to their parents. Such a methodology kept the children at school and while our charity clubs managed to satisfy the parents with some of their essentials, the funds we got from the government managed the studies of the kids. Thus began a milestone.

SEVENTEEN

After some time, Dhiraj and I went to Benares. There was a conference organized by the department of Women Studies of a University on social empowerment for widowed women. We travelled by train and reached on a fine evening. I never knew that my perspective on forbearance after my stay there was going to be changed forever.

We booked a room in a hotel. He had signed on the registrar of the hotel 'Mr and Mrs Dhiraj'. We both laughed at the idea. It was an important occasion; we were out somewhere together for the first time as a couple. We unpacked our bags. We ordered for something to eat after we had cleaned ourselves. It was a one day conference but we planned to stay for two or three days more.

When we reached the conference hall the next day, we were briefed about the lives of the widows who lived in Benares. Some had retired from life and others were cast away by families. These women were housed in a hostel where nearly two hundred widows lived. They were fed and looked after. They were ignored by their families.

Ever since I had started working for the NGO I was confronted with so many issues, issues I never could have thought existed in modern India.

I not only read about the mass poverty in our country but I began living with the poor for a few hours of my day every day. I saw the missing link between promises and governance.

When the meeting was concluded I saw the chairperson of the Widow Woman's Hostel. I accosted her and I requested her that I wanted to pay a visit to the hostel.

After the conference, she happily took us to the hostel. There were three floors. The older women lived on the ground floor, the mid-aged women lived on the first floor and the young newly widowed lived on the second floor. When I entered the hostel, I saw shaven heads talking to each other. They were clad in white and some of them were talking merrily to each other and some were deep into prayers.

Those talking to each other saw me and greeted me. I folded my hands together and greeted them but they didn't give any blessings, they told me a widow's blessings were ill omen. I asked them how they were doing and how did they spend the days. They told me they were happier there than with their families. Without husbands the children had started treating them sourly and so the women in the hostel shared with each other a comradeship of loneliness. They tried to create a common illusion and sentiment of being in a family but at times such illusions betrayed them and they dearly missed the love of their husbands and children.

When I went up on the first floor, I felt choked by its gloomy atmosphere. On that floor, none talked much to each other. Each was lost in her own reverie, ever quiet and ever mute. The widows on the first floor had wrinkled brows as if they were deep in thoughts and as if they were angry with the divinity. Some of them had been living there for some years but they still found the alien surrounding irking and no matter how much they tried to get used to the place, they found themselves at odds. Those on the first floor were the constantly questioning ones. They questioned 'why' everywhere. They asked themselves why they could not be happy, why their children had changed, why their husbands had left them mid-way. For them it was a continuous expectation, an

eternal wait that maybe someday their sons and daughters might suffer some change of heart and come to take them home. Spurned by their own society and left to feel like debris, they wanted to fight the world with their silence.

When I reached the second floor, I realized none of the rooms had lit any lights. The doors were shut. There were a bulb or two in the corridor giving away a very dim light but besides that there were no light on that floor. There was a door in the far end that was open; I went to see if anyone was inside. Through the dim light I saw, there were two beds in the small room and there was a figure sitting on the far end of one of the beds. She had propped her head on her palm with her elbow on the upper end of the bed and she knelt on the end of the bed, looking out through a shut wood boarded window. I saw her back. She had an attractive back with a slim waist and long jet black hair. I tried to imagine how she must have adorned that hair when she was a lively wife to a man.

Oh, how she must have ensnared so many men with those walking waist. I wanted to talk to her, she wasn't aware I was standing at her door. I knocked slightly but she didn't turn. I knocked again but she didn't turn. As I was about to turn she tilted back her head to look at me in a weary way. My heart broke. She had a dusky complexion, such fine eyes that were wet with the stream of tears that flowed out relentless of time and civilizations.

She was so beautiful, a beauty capable of a near inspiration to an artist maybe. But the figure only gave a glance to me and went back to looking out of the shut window. Yes, she was fit to be only a picture; because she had no life in her. I could have passed by her thinking she was some aesthetic clay model but her tears failed to support my supposition.

I went back to the hotel. As I moved away from the widows, my heart reached out towards their misery. The image of the talking

widows came before my eyes. Those women were accustomed to their sufferings and they could console themselves giving their fate the name of God's will. I questioned when could have, the epoch of the sufferings of those beings made by the same God, been conceived?

I felt a sense of futility over the motive of the conference. It was difficult to empower those who had no desire to live, whose days were plainly marked as merely passing away of daylight and the coming of darkness. The first task was to rekindle their desire to live, but it was not easy. Women, who were born with relations to look after them- fathers, brothers, husbands, children, whom they served with the pride of a God given duty, felt the world empty, life unmoving, unbecoming, when those relations were suddenly scraped away from them. I wondered what forbearance those women had, to overcome the humungous miseries embracing them as destiny.

I asked myself if anything can bring them back to life. I searched for the longed answer in my love making with Dhiraj, in the roaming streets, in the scenic beauty, in the lobby of the hotel room. I searched for the answer in the forming and dismantling clouds. I searched for the answer among the soaring birds but none delivered the answer to me. I was defeated by the obtuse working of a detrimental tradition.

I did not wish to stay any longer so I asked Dhiraj to take me back to Delhi. He didn't object. In the train I sat beside the window, I thoughts were grotesque. I thought if Harsh were to go from my life, I asked myself if I was ever going to mourn for him the way those women in Benares mourned for their deceased husbands.

My thoughts on my way back to Delhi were more occupied with Harsh than Dhiraj. I was going to feel sad, terrible; if Dhiraj and I parted ways but Dhiraj's going was not going to impose

upon me customs and traditions to be followed; only my emotional strength was going to be tested. Again there was some hatred for Harsh rising out of me. Traditions and culture are attached with legitimacy, what is illegitimate need not bother about them.

I did not sleep through the journey. I kept staring out of the clear window. The scenes shifted from the station to some trees. It was a kinetoscope, the scenes shifted from the trees of the jungle to villages and from villages I saw the landscape of a city, the jungle of cemented buildings. In travelling a few hours in the train I saw how the human race had moved on. We had changed the make-up of the society but the interior architecture of the thinking mind hadn't evolved much with the technology.

I didn't want to go back home. I was tired and I had informed Harsh I was coming back in four or five days so I stayed that night with Dhiraj.

EIGHTEEN

My community schools were running well. We were able to form small pockets of schools in around 10 more slum areas. I spent two hours of my day to teach those kids and I answered to their never ending, mind boggling questions every day. Those two hours comprised the best part of my day.

While my illegitimate relationship was flourishing, there came a change of feelings with Harsh. He was constantly pressurized by his parents to make up with me. He was also aware of my affair with Dhiraj so he knew reconciliation was very complicated with me. He had thought I was merely trying to make him jealous or perhaps he thought I was taking some sort of revenge by hurting him in being with a man who was not the husband. But I had astounded him.

I went back to Harsh in a couple of days. My parents-in-law were cordial to me. I realized how desperately they wanted to make Harsh and I reconcile. That evening Harsh came back earlier. I saw there was no purpose as he sat in the drawing room watching the TV with his parents and I was cooking. We had dinner in silence and then Harsh asked if I wanted to go out for a walk. I told him I had kitchen to clean and I was tired. Without putting much effort to convince me for a walk he went to sleep.

The next morning when we were having breakfast, Harsh broke the news that we were going to Kerela for a few days. I was truly surprised because his tactic ensured I could not refuse or fight in front of his parents. Before I could say anything, my parents-in-

law had already proclaimed it was a fabulous idea. He produced two flight tickets and I was sent off to pack my stuffs in a hurry. I called up Dhiraj and told him my husband had gone mad. I informed Dhiraj that Harsh had bought two tickets to Kerela and I told him I was going very reluctantly with Harsh.

If the artifice that Harsh took to, had been invented some years back when we still had a chance with some time devoted to us then we could have travelled as a happy married couple. That day however, we both acted very awkward.

When we reached the hotel, I was tormented when I saw him write on the registrar 'Mr and Mrs.Harsh'. How I wanted to change it! Inside the room we changed our clothes with much cordiality, I did not change in front of him and he also did not change in front of me. That was some practice we had started at home only and which we couldn't do away with even in privacy when we were alone. I missed Dhiraj so much, I wanted to call him but every time I picked up the phone Harsh said something like 'let's go out', 'let's go on the beach', and 'let's get a drink.'

We spent the first two days with much cordiality. We had lunch and dinner together, we went out together and we complied to pretty much whatever made us happy but it was only to make our stay together easier and it was not a truce.

On the third day we were compelled to be put in the room because of the rain on the beach. I went by the window and I was filled with nostalgia over my first love making with Dhiraj. I closed my eyes, and I tried to imagine him, he was there and he was smiling to me. I felt a physical embrace, I was rapturously happy, Dhiraj was there somehow, I had my eyes still closed fearing the happy illusion might be lost if I opened my eyes. The hands turned me towards him, he kissed my cheeks softly, he felt my collar bones with his hot lips, he hissed his breadth on my neck and I felt a weakness along my limps. He then gave a kiss on my mouth.

I was horror struck. I opened my eyes and I saw Harsh kissing me. I screamed at him;

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING? GET OUT! I SAID GET OUT!"

I was hysterical, he was confused, and he couldn't understand what I wanted. For a moment he thought the reconciliation was achieved. He had his wife in his embrace again, she was enjoying but he couldn't understand what had happened to her after that. He left the room to her. She was shrieking at his vehemence as if a stranger had dared touched her.

The rain had stopped in a couple of hours. Harsh sat on the wet beach for many hours, afraid to go back and face the unnerved wife. He felt pity for his marriage and nothing else. He realised he had contributed to much of what it had resulted but his parents and his wife were not interested in listening to his part of the story.

When he went inside the hotel to finally confront his wife and make her listen to whatever he wanted to say, he found the room empty. His wife had packed her stuffs and left for Delhi alone. She had however written a note for him, a way of conveying a message she had learnt from Dhiraj but she hadn't written any 'I love you' to him the way Dhiraj wrote for her. On the note was written,

"I am sorry, we both have moved on and to reconcile in this manner because of parental pressure is absurd. We are only creating more problems for each other; you stay in Kerela if you like or better still call your girlfriend to stay with you over here. I am leaving for Delhi and I will live with Dhiraj until you come back."

Hopelessness filled him. He prepared to leave for Delhi as well.

NINETEEN

I saw on my phone that Dhiraj had called me several times. I took pleasure in the fact that somewhere he was yearning for me. I felt the thrill of an impending union with Dhiraj. I thought I might as well make him yearn more for me, so I didn't give him a call and planned on a surprised show up at his door. It was night and I had taken a flight from Kerela to Delhi. After a few hours when I reached Delhi, I took a cab to Dhiraj's place. It was 2 a.m. when I reached his place, his apartment was in darkness, I moved smoothly around I didn't feel the need to grope if objects were in front of me. Through a very dim light I saw Dhiraj walking to and fro in his room. He was smoking.

"You haven't slept yet?"

My voice registered a sudden admittance of myself in his room, he was startled and looked towards the door and as if he couldn't believe my audible voice he put on the lights of the room and found me standing in front of him.

"You!" he exclaimed, baffled.

"Why, you were expecting someone else at this hour?"

In an almost child-like manner, he ran towards me and he wrapped me in the warmth of his arms. He closed his eyes, smiling reassuringly and said 'you have come, you have come' several times.

He had been in torment since my absence. My absence had

made him realize that somebody else was in control over me and in not having me around; he had me all the more everywhere. So he saw me in his work, he saw me at his home, and every other thing became a longing to clasp that vision in his arms.

We laid ourselves down on the bed and he was stroking my hair gently. We made a gentle love, I felt him cling to me, caress me. It was not the love making of just lovers anymore, but the love-making of having missed someone, of wanting to possess, the love making when someone had nearly lost his love, of relishing the person who was back in your arms because you never know when he was going to go again. It was a clinging love. I went to sleep knowing he was watching over me. I felt the peck he gave me now and then on my cheeks, when I had half way travelled through the realm of the unconscious I could sense his feelings following me there too.

There was a huge balcony attached to his room in which Dhiraj had planted little shrub trees, some berries and strawberries. In a large pot there was a midget banyan tree and here and there he had planted many midget bamboo trees. Birds often came on that balcony for their morning delight. When I used to be at his place; I was awakened many a times by the chirping of those birds. Then I used to receive a shower of kisses followed by our morning love-making, but that morning only the birds announced the sunrise. There came no kisses for me. When I searched for Dhiraj through my half open eyes I found him propped up on the rocking chair near the bed. He was looking at me intently. The weary looks on his face told me he hadn't slept the whole night. He was nervous about something.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

He looked at me so seriously that he scared me.

"I thought I would never see you again." He said plainly hiding

all clear effects of emotions from his voice.

"So silly of you. Why did you think that way?" I asked.

"I thought your husband had found out about us and he had deliberately taken you away from me."

"Dhiraj there was nothing hidden from him. What was there to find out about?"

I was hurt by Dhiraj's words for the first time. Words like "I thought your husband had found out" made me feel like I was cheating on Harsh, that I was doing something wrong. I had long ago told myself, convinced myself that what I had with Dhiraj was needed for my survival because he made me happy. I was proud of what I had with Dhiraj. He had made me realize what I wanted to do with my life. But his shaking words, the insecurity that I saw for the first time in his eyes shook the very foundations of my belief.

Waking up early in the morning, I found myself almost confronting the reality of my life. I asked myself if Dhiraj was only a mirage I saw, just as Harsh was a mirage. Harsh had vanished when I gave legitimacy to that vision.

"When he took you away I felt like someone was taking away my existence, I was so afraid that your husband had found out about us and he had decided to take you away."

"Dhiraj, can you please stop saying 'found out, found out' for once?"

My irritation was rising and my eyes were starting to see the child underneath him. I was so used to seeing the strong and intelligent, witty Dhiraj that the vision of that selfish, all wanting child who wanted to have me to himself disgusted me.

"He doesn't have the power to do anything for me." I told Dhiraj about Harsh. I was still trying to control myself.

"But he can use that power anytime." He told me and I felt an uncontrollable sense of disgust for that whimpering man who was anything but Dhiraj.

"What are you so insecure about?" I asked.

"I want to take away from your husband that power."

I felt my forehead with my hands. I had left Harsh alone in Kerela because I couldn't stand being there with him. Harsh had ceased to give me any sense of a promise for peace and marital happiness. But the morning with Dhiraj was becoming unbearable too.

"Marry me."

It was not a question put before me, it was not a command to be followed. I could not consider that proposal because I felt it was rather a plea from a person who was afraid or even a person who wanted to take vengeance. He stood up and said again, 'marry me'. I looked at him. I was left speechless by that new person I was seeing,

"And what after that?" I asked.

"We get married and we live together that's it."

"You know I used to think about marriage that same way which is why I am here with you today, running away from that person I had loved some years ago." I told him.

"But it won't happen with us."

"How do you know?"

"Because we understand each other."

"Once marriage enters our life, the very idea of an understanding between us would be constantly tested. When you marry me it's not like we can keep the relationship clandestine the way it is today. Dhiraj don't you understand that I want to be free of mundane societal expectations. I want to achieve a certain thing in my life and marriage crops my wings. I am everything that our society and traditions are not. And both these entities come in a free package with a legitimate relationship like marriage and I want to stay out of it because there is no place for women an especially a woman like me in our society. That is why I am untraditional. That is why I am unconventional and out-going."

He looked at me with some hopelessness, like a child who was denied of something and desolation filled his mind.

"Besides don't you remember, you had dumbed that girlfriend of yours because you wanted different things in life, things you had realized was beyond a regular married life. You wanted to marry the social ambitions; you wanted to do a lot of things for the society. How can you think of throwing all that away for me?"

Dhiraj looked helpless; I felt some pity for him. He looked at me and finally asked, "Why are you so scared?"

I was exasperated. He was holding up a mirror to himself and he was telling me the image he saw was me, not him.

I told him, "I am not scared. I am telling you; reminding you of the things we wanted which is why we share such a good relationship. If it had not been for our mutual appreciation of our ambitions and intellect, do you think we would have liked each other? We would have even met? I have had one marriage, a limping

relationship, even with amputated arms and it constantly needed to be assisted and checked. It didn't want to rise out of its situation but it took pleasure in tormenting me. I don't want to go from one marriage to another, from one man to another. The chain has to be cut somewhere. Oh, Dhiraj you are everything I want because you are everything I don't find in this world. Why did you have to say all these?"

Dhiraj stood silent all that while I was talking to him, I realized I was not crying although I was sad but I was arguing with all my might to bring some sense into him. He turned away from me and persisted, "what if I still asked you to marry me?"

I looked at his back and without thinking twice I stepped down from the bed. An epitome hit me. Maybe, I had thrown away my life for Harsh once because I was afraid to lose him; maybe because we both thought only rendering the relationship with some legitimacy could have made us exercise power and authority over each other. Dhiraj was not aware of the consequences of such hasty demands the way I was.

"I want to move beyond the encrypted functions of a lover, a daughter, a wife, a mother. I want to be just me. Because when I am everything else I am not me and as long as I am not me I will never know what it's like to be me, what is it that I want."

He still had his eyes and body turned away from me, he didn't say for a minute or two. He took the rocking chair and sat down on it, eyes upward as if he was visualizing something, he told me, "I cannot live like this with you anymore. I will always be afraid that someday you will reconcile with your husband and I will be left alone. Fear of losing you will lurk around me all the time. I don't want to share you with anyone."

He went silent after saying that. I looked at him, trying to think what to tell him, what to tell myself but all I could do, too

impulsively, was to get dressed and pick up my suitcase and walk out.

As I left I only told him,

"I am sorry you feel that way. I am not a pendulum to move between you and Harsh. I am much more than that I thought you had realized that. I deny you this right to call me yours not because I don't love you but because such an approval would only come to question our self-identity again. I hope you understand."

I placed the key on the bed; something was telling me I wasn't going to come back to Dhiraj again. I stopped at the threshold and looked back, looked at all the things around which I had started adorning in the last few months. Then I walked out of that door for the last time.

TWENTY

I reached home; it was around 11 in the morning. With a heavy heart I entered the door and I was nervous to face because I had come from Kerela alone I didn't know what I was going to tell them about Harsh but when I entered the place, I saw Harsh waiting for me.

HARSH WAS WAITING FOR ME THERE, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FIVE YEARS, HE WAS WAITING FOR ME.

It almost made me feel like reaching out to him. But I wasn't ready to reach out to him. I rather felt like one of those wives shown in films and characterized in certain novels who had come back to their husbands guilt ridden, waiting for a resurrection of their chastity by their forgiveness and love. I did not want to be one of those women. I didn't want to come back to Harsh. The cycle of dependency, frustration, fights, tradition, culture, everything was going to start again if I reconciled with Harsh.

"Something told me you would come", he said.

His words were delivered to me to be interpreted in another plane of comparison. His words brought to me a very strict sense of coming back, like he was saying he knew I had to come back to him, like he was trying to tell me that I had strayed away for a while but after realising my mistakes I had come back to him. I didn't say anything to him and I went inside my bedroom.

Behind the closed door, I started thinking hard over the

upcoming steps. I had come away from Dhiraj to be myself. It didn't make any sense if I stayed there with Harsh. I felt the pulse of some throbbing energy within me.

The only way was to walk out of Harsh's life too, but walking out of Harsh's life was not a matter of picking up a suitcase and walking away.

I wondered what was going to happen to me if I removed myself from my husband's society. I had read about women like me. Some characters like Anna Karenina had committed suicide in removing herself from the husband's society. Kate Chopin in The Awakening had also killed her woman protagonist. I wondered if there was any place for me in that world of God's. I contemplated over committing suicide as well but I only ended laughing over such an idea. I felt ridiculous. I was the new type of transgressing woman and I wanted to start the trend of living.

Then, I thought of movies where the heroines who had strayed away went back to their husbands' guilt ridden. But the problem with that contemplation was that I wasn't guilt ridden about my affair with Dhiraj, and I certainly didn't want to submit myself to Harsh. I didn't want to go back to my husband. I loathed him even then as I had loathed him before because he was responsible for the state into which I had descended. The only way I had resolved was to walk out of Harsh's life too, if I had broken the chains with Dhiraj why was I going to be bias to the chains that bound me to Harsh just because he was my husband.

I wanted to be independent; if I went to my parents I was going to attract a lot of questions to them too.

No.

I was resolved to put up independently. Because the motive of my walking away was to find the person in me, to pursue what I

wanted unimpeded. I wanted to be the Queen in my life rather than being a slave in the material world of God. I packed some of my essentials and I walked out. Harsh was still waiting there, but when he saw I was coming out with a suitcase, he got disappointed,

"Are you going to Dhiraj?"

Surprisingly, I gave a smile to myself at the question. How these men considered women to be those ping pong balls that kept bouncing from one side to another. Each wants the other should miss the ball.

"Unfortunately, I have given up on juggling between the two of you." I told him.

"Where are you going then?"

"To a beginning."

"But where?"

"Anywhere where there is a beginning for me."

"So you are resolved?"

"Yes"

He looked at me and he said somewhat convincingly, "You know I don't know how important it would sound now but I think you should listen to me before you leave. I will not try to change your mind because I know you won't, but I don't want you to leave without knowing that I have missed you. You were rather so eager to play the wife and the daughter-in-law, you had always told me that in one's home relationships were a birth-right but in a married space one has to qualify and earn those relationships. In

effect you turned all your energy into pleasing everyone but I felt like you had migrated somewhere, you had left your lover behind to earn a husband. Your affection became waking up in the morning and preparing me for my work, you packed my lunch, and you gave me breakfast. The life you took to after our marriage completely changed you; it led you away from me, from our love, even from who you are and what you want from life. In altering yourself, I could not recognise you. I wanted to talk to you at times but you just didn't have the time for me. I hope you will realise that nobody asked you to take the stereotype, to endorse the definition of a good wife. You felt it was expected of you and so you observed all the functions like an obsessed person, too keen on making others happy, especially my parents because you wanted to prove my decision of choosing you as my wife was right. I don't blame you for anything, I believe our society gives a role to everybody to act out, a rule book to follow, but these abstract regulations become an innate part of our existence as it takes up the shape of codes of conduct which gets translated to become expectations."

"I felt estranged from you, until it was easier to cheat on you to dress my wounds than to complain to you. In saying all these, I am going to admit my own weaknesses too. I could not draw you back, I could not defend you against expectations when there was time, I watched you drift yourself away from me instead of trying to draw you back to me. I let you suffer all this time because I was disdainfully waiting for you and I got lost in my own worm hole of self-gratification. I am very happy for you that you are finally above everything. I only wish if we had remedied our sense of dislocation from each other we could have both discovered a joint future together."

I listened to him, and in listening to his own complications, I felt a mutual bond of comradeship in the wake of the new understanding. I gave a deep sigh.

He however continued his expression, "I only want to say this

for the last time that I have always wanted to have your love the most. Losing you in the name of raising a family was painful for me, and I felt you were blind to my needs. I wanted to make you feel as much need for me and as much pain in wanting me. I wish we had once told each other how much we wanted each other without going through all those silence and unruly means."

"Harsh, what's the use now. I am sorry for what ever has happened to us, but for the qualms you might have against me for taking to the life I lived after my marriage I only felt more proper to do so and more so because I thought I was making you happy. We have learnt the hard way that life demands much more from us than these abstract rules can supply us with. Where there is the over-burdening power of religion, culture, tradition, logic, blind love cannot thrive. Thank you. But I cannot stop here. I can't go back to the cave where I might lose myself again. If I remain here, there will be no end of the expectations, I would be thrust into the society whose paradigm of existence I don't want to understand, not because I can't but because I have so much to compromise upon if I start to, so I will never be happy and the cycle of alienation from myself and from you will continue."

Harsh gave a faint smile and said," And who's asking you to stop?"

"Good luck", he said at last.

I beamed at him. I picked up my suitcase and prepared to walk out. I faced the door and touched the handle to open it. I walked out to finally step into my own shoes, to be forever myself and forever myself.

The author was born in Manipur. She studied in Little Flower School, a convent school, in Imphal. She has graduated from Rajdhani College, Delhi University. She has always been academically ambitious. She was the Joint Secretary of the English Department during the first year of her graduation. She has topped all the three years of her graduation.

This is the author's first novel.